

## *Original Paper*

# Realizing Learner Autonomy in a Foreign Language Class

Zorana Vasiljevic<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Literature, Bunkyo University, Koshigaya, Japan

\* Zorana Vasiljevic, E-mail: zorana@koshigaya.bunkyo.ac.jp

*Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.*

—W.B. Yeats (1865-1939)

### **Abstract**

*This paper introduces an example of a university language programme developed around the idea that autonomy is an inherent component of true learning. After a brief introduction to the learning context, real-classroom example of how learner autonomy can be fostered over the course of an academic year is presented. Samples of worksheets used for strategy training and the examples of students' work at the planning, information integration and reflection stages are shared. The paper also discusses some of the challenges that the teacher and the learners faced in their efforts to transform a university language class into an opportunity for true self-actualization and personal growth.*

### **Keywords**

*learner autonomy, teacher development workshops*

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, learner autonomy has become something of a buzzword in language education. The popularity of this concept is perhaps not surprising. There is something intrinsically appealing about a model of learning in which learners take back control from the teachers and start making decisions about the content of their learning, their goals and the methods they are going to use to achieve them.

Realizing the ideal of learner autonomy in practice, however, can be a challenging endeavour for both learners and their teachers. Autonomy requires self-awareness – the ability to perceive one's true needs, values and opinions. It requires both the ability to set one's own learning goals, and to decide on the approaches to be taken to achieve them, and the existence of a willingness to take responsibility for the outcomes of these decisions. Finally, autonomy requires an environment that promotes and rewards self-conceptualization. Meeting these conditions can be difficult owing to both different kinds of institutional constraints, as well as teachers' and learners' perceptions of autonomy. This paper will introduce an example of a university language programme developed around the idea that autonomy is

an inherent component of true learning. After a brief introduction to the learning context, real-classroom examples of how learner autonomy can be fostered over the course of an academic year will be presented. Samples of worksheets used for strategy training and the examples of students' work at the planning, information integration and reflection stages will be shared, with special attention being given to the development of learner autonomy at each stage of the cycle. The paper will also discuss some of the challenges that the teacher and the learners in this course faced in their efforts to transform a university language class into an opportunity for true self-actualization and personal growth.

## 2. The Teaching Context

### 2.1 Background

The programme to be described in this paper has been implemented at a private university in Japan. The fact that the teaching context is situated in Japan is interesting for two reasons. First, Japan has arguably fallen behind when it comes to foreign language education. Despite there being a large number of language schools and the government's attempts to increase the level of English proficiency, according to the TOEIC Test Report on Test Takers Worldwide (2005), Japan ranked among the lowest in Asia, with an average TOEIC score of only 449 points. Part of the problem has been the inclusion of English in university entrance exams, which has resulted in a strict curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education and a strong emphasis on rote learning. For many students learning has become equal to passing a test, an attitude that has led to both low levels of communicative competence and the loss of learners' motivation. Another problem is the conservatism of the Japanese society, which puts strong pressure on an individual to conform and its insular mentality, which has led to a widespread resistance to learning foreign languages. For example, Bunmei Ibuki, the former education minister, upon his appointment in 2006 stated that "teaching English may be necessary in the global community, but as a Japanese, one must first be able to speak proper Japanese" (Makihara, 2006). Masahiko Fujiwara, a mathematician and the author of a best-selling book *Dignity of a Nation*, argues that the Japanese should be proud of their low English scores as they are a result of the fact that Japan has never been colonized or forced to speak another language. The examples above show a low level of perceived need for foreign language proficiency within the Japanese society. Finally, Japan is also one of the countries with a very strong tradition of the teacher-centered model of instruction. The teacher is typically seen as an authority, a source of knowledge, an activity planner and a quality controller, with learners having a very limited input with regard to course content or classroom procedures. In short, foreign language educational practices in Japan have not been conducive to either foreign language learning or the development of learner autonomy.

While the national educational culture presents challenges to fostering learner autonomy, the culture of the university where the course to be described has been implemented has been very open to the idea of

promoting learners' independence and self-directed learning. In the 'Introduction to English Courses' on the university homepage, academic literacy has been set as the main goal of the curriculum with the following four objectives being seen as the primary concerns for the teacher: 1) development of students' comfort and confidence in using English, 2) development of control of the research process and content, 3) clarity of expressing ideas in speaking and writing, and 4) criticality in learning and thinking about issues. The programme is coordinated by three full-time instructors fully committed to the idea of promoting both teacher and learner autonomy. Their efforts have resulted in the establishment of the students' Resource Center, which contains a selection of Graded Readers and materials for developing listening skills, vocabulary learning resources, academic writing guides and textbooks, TOEFL and TOEIC practice materials as well as the texts related to law studies and political science. The students also have an access to the online resources on 'The Teaching and Learning English' website, which contains the links to simplified and authentic texts on legal, political, environmental and social issues as well as samples of students' work from different courses and levels, such as students' essays, research notes and posters. The department also organizes an annual Retreat (Faculty Workshop) where the teachers have an opportunity to exchange their ideas on the curriculum objectives, content of the courses, and classroom practices. Finally, the commitment to student-centered learning is also reflected in the physical arrangement of the classrooms where the traditional benches have been replaced with eight round tables each seating three to four people. This seating arrangement is conducive to collaborative learning as it allows students to form groups easily and also makes it easier for the teacher to monitor and possibly intervene in students' discussions.

### *2.2 Students*

The students who are enrolled in this programme are majoring in law, politics or international business and law. They tend to have somewhat higher proficiency than the national average with the TOEIC scores of about 510. Some students are also interested in pursuing careers abroad or working for foreign companies in Japan and, therefore, they feel the need for improving their English ability. A certain number of students, however, still perceive English as just another course they need to take to get a credit and even the most motivated students typically join the programme with a high-level of teacher-dependency. This means that the main obstacles to the development of learner autonomy in this programme tend to come from the learners' themselves, their beliefs and their attitudes to learning rather than from external constraints. Therefore, in addition to the development of their language skills, changing the learners' ideas about what the purpose of learning really is and encouraging them to become more proactive in their learning have been seen as the main objectives of the courses.

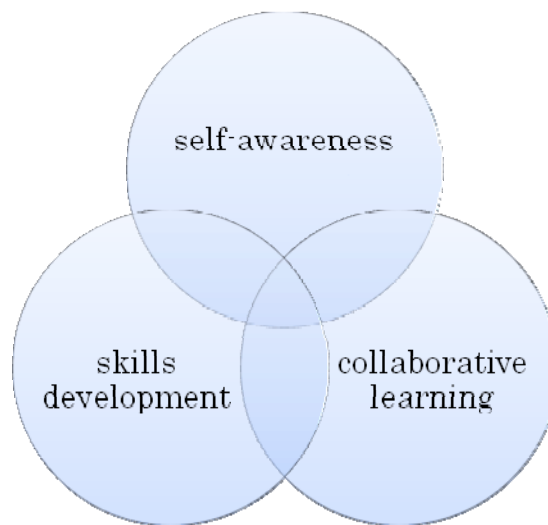
### *2.3 Course Overview*

Although the development of academic literacy and learner autonomy are common areas of focus across the whole curriculum, the materials and the procedures that will be described in this paper are based on the class work done in the Basic Research and Discussion course. This is a content-focused

listening and speaking course for first and second year students at the intermediate level (TOEIC 430 to 545). The target language is employed both as the medium of learning and the basis for students' reflections and negotiations with other learners. By doing research about the social, political, legal and global issues of their interests, students improve their use of English, their research and note-taking skills, their presentation and discussion skills, and they develop criticality about learning processes.

The course lasts one academic year and consists of thirty 90-minute lessons, organized into research cycles of three to four weeks during which students explore the topic of their choice in depth, and discuss the results of their research in pairs and small groups. At the end of each research cycle, the students give a final presentation to a group of three other students or fewer, which might involve posters, flip-posters or PowerPoint slides.

Autonomy-fostering practices adopted in this course can be broadly divided into three areas: raising learners' self-awareness, skills development and collaborative learning.



**Figure 1. The three dimensions of learner autonomy development**

As Figure 1 shows, these dimensions simply describe different focuses in the development of learner autonomy; in practice they are complementary and interdependent competencies.

### **3. Raising Learners' Self-Awareness**

One of the pre-conditions for learners to be able to change their attitudes to learning and their learning strategies is that they understand who they are. McCarthy and Schmeck (1988) identify self-concept as the most important cognitive factor and self-esteem as the most important affective factor when it comes to learners organizing and interpreting their experiences. Self-concept is a multi-dimensional construct that entails the perceptions that individuals hold about their personalities, their skills and

abilities, the values they hold, the relationships they enter into and their physical appearance. Self-esteem can be defined as a degree to which individuals are satisfied with the self-concept that they have defined. Self-esteem is an important construct in establishing personal identity as the way in which individuals feel about themselves will affect their behaviour and how they relate to the others.

Self-concept and self-esteem are constructs that play an important role in the formation of learning experiences. The perceptions that each person has about himself or herself shape the goals that they set for themselves, the strategies they may deploy to reach them and the feelings they may develop with regard to their successes or failures. McCarthy and Schmeck (1988) observe that learners with poor self-concept and low self-esteem are more likely to adopt shallow, passive and repetitive strategies and are less likely to engage with the content deeply and try to relate it to prior knowledge or personal experience. They are also more likely to be biased towards their successes and failures. For these reasons, a significant portion of the course time has been devoted to helping learners understand themselves, and examine their attitudes, beliefs, their learning practices and their outcomes.

The course typically begins with the opportunity for learners to get to know each other and reflect on their past learning experiences. The students are encouraged to share their memories of language learning, both good and bad, and to examine the reasons behind their feelings. Some questions also concern students' beliefs about language learning such as the importance of acquiring a native-like proficiency, the relative importance of fluency and accuracy in the second language, and the role of age and motivation in language learning. (For question samples, refer to Appendix 1.) At this stage, the students are also asked to consider what the purpose of education really is (e.g. acquiring specific skills and knowledge, acquiring a qualification, personal and intellectual growth, securing a well-paid job, etc.). The learners are then given a sheet with a question - "What does autonomy mean to you?" - and they are asked to complete a mind map with the words they feel best answer this question. After that, they share their ideas with their classmates, and a mind map with attributes of autonomy as defined by the students is completed on the board. Finally, the course objectives are presented to the students, and classroom and assessment procedures are explained in detail. The students are then asked to reflect on their knowledge of the target skills, to identify the areas that they would like to improve most and to set their goals and objectives for the course (see Appendix 2).

One important area of concern in the development of learner autonomy is time management. Without prior experience with the research cycle model of learning, the students often forget to account for the time needed to find the suitable resources and the time needed to review the class content and earlier research notes. Raising learners' awareness about the importance of these steps helps them to make more realistic study plans and overall to gain a better control over their learning process. Therefore, in the initial stages of the course, the learners are encouraged to reflect on how they organize their learning and how much time they can really devote to language studies. They are asked to make weekly study plans and then to evaluate how closely they were able to follow that schedule. (For the worksheet,

see Appendix 3). In short, the purpose of these introductory lessons is not to provide learners with a list of “correct answers” and definitions, but to encourage them to examine their feelings about learning, their past learning experiences and the role they see for themselves as language learners, and to use that information to identify their needs and develop realistic expectations about the course.

Reflections continue to be frequently used in the later stages of the course as a way of helping learners to acquire the new skills, to plan their learning, and to evaluate their progress. Students are prompted to examine the problems they face during the research process and the strategies they adopt to solve them, and to compare these approaches with those of their peers. Reflection as a mode of learning benefits learners in multiple ways. It prompts them to examine their beliefs, values, needs and purposes and to take a critical stance on their learning practices. It also encourages them to relate the content to their prior knowledge and past experiences. Self-reference in the learning process is a central psychological component of autonomy and a factor of great significance for the learning outcomes. By reflecting on their work, students can develop self-awareness and begin to attend more consciously to their language development. Reflections can also help learners to see their improvement, and that sense of accomplishment is likely to have a positive effect on their motivation and future studies. Reflection is also likely to improve the retention of the content. Understanding a topic means being able to derive the content from one’s own mental structures, and no true learning can happen before new information is integrated in the learners’ existing system of knowledge (Pask, 1988). Self-reference promotes deeper and richer coding of input and, as a result, faster and longer retention of information (Rogers, Kuiper & Kirker, 1977). Finally, reflections can also be used for learners’ assessment. While it might be difficult to base students’ grades solely on their self-reflections, self-assessment can be incorporated in the evaluation of classroom learning. Having the students involved in the formal evaluation of their learning helps them to become more responsible about their learning practices (Natri, 2007) and increases their motivation (Blanche, 1989). In short, reflections increase students’ self-awareness and help them to learn from their experiences. For these reasons, reflection has been established as one of the common focus points of the whole programme and is an integral element of the development of the learning skills described in the following section. (For some examples of students’ reflections, see Appendix 4.)

#### **4. Skills Development**

The target skills for the Basic Research and Discussion course can be broadly divided into four groups: note-taking skills, research skills, vocabulary learning skills, and presentation and listening skills. The skills training was introduced following the results of a number of studies (e.g. Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Cohen 1998; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Oxford, 1994) that suggest that learners’ meta-cognitive development can be promoted through strategy training.

#### *4.1 Note-Taking skills*

Instruction in note-taking typically begins with a discussion of the techniques that could make note-taking more efficient and more effective. The students are usually aware that not all words need to be recorded, and they will often mention strategies such as ‘focusing on key-words’ and ‘using symbols’. However, the first note-practice tasks usually reveal a big gap between the students’ declarative knowledge and the practices they adopt. The first notes they take are often very similar to a dictation. The students often try to record all the words they hear even when they are not important or could be replaced with the synonyms with orthographic forms. In order to practise the use of key-words, symbols and abbreviations, I often do an activity where students are placed into pairs and given a handout with five different sentences each for Student A and Student B. Student A starts as a coaching partner and reads aloud each sentence twice at a normal speed. Student B listens and takes notes. After all five sentences have been recorded, Student B refers to his or her notes and restates the sentences. In Step 2, Student B acts as the coaching partner and the procedure is repeated. (For a sample of this activity, see Appendix 5.) As a follow-up activity, students can be asked to compare their note-taking styles, or to share some of their notes with the whole class by writing them on the board. After the students become more comfortable with the use of key-words, symbols and abbreviations, more attention is given to organization of the notes. The students are introduced to the different organizational patterns such as chronological order, the for-and-against format, and the problem-solution format, and the advantages of using section headings are pointed out. The students are prompted to try to group ideas together rather than just recording them in the same order in which they were encountered in the texts, and they are encouraged to experiment with lay-outs to find those that best suit the nature of their topics. One way of helping the students to acquire the skill of synthesizing information from different sources is to give them several related texts with a specific research question. To increase the communicative value of the activity, I usually have students work in pairs or small groups. Each student gets a different text and a different research question. They share the content of the article with their peers and gather the relevant information. This can also be done as a whole class activity where all the students listen to an extract and then read a text on the related topic. In order to practise integrating information from different sources in class, it is important that the sources are not too long and that the vocabulary does not present difficulties for the learners. In my experience, texts of about 600 to 700 words, and listening materials of two to three minutes in length seem to be a manageable workload for students at this level.

#### *4.2 Research Skills*

The Basic Research and Discussion course does not use a textbook, and the content of the lessons is provided by the students themselves. Therefore, improving students’ ability to select the right sources and to formulate research questions is considered very important for both the success of the course and the development of learner autonomy. For the research cycles in the first semester, the students are

encouraged to use the texts on the university website, some of which have been simplified and some of which are offered in their original version. As the students become more comfortable with the research process, a portion of class time is devoted to discussions about the criteria for source selection such as the credentials of the authors, the purpose of the publications, their currency, etc. To initiate the discussion on this topic, I often use an example from Alec Fisher's book *Critical Thinking*. Fisher approaches the question of source credibility by presenting a fictional case of a traffic accident: two cars have collided and both drivers are denying responsibility. A mother and child waiting to cross the road witnessed the accident; however, their accounts of what happened differ. While the mother claims it was the red car's driver who jumped the red light, the child claims it was the driver of the white car. A policeman who was also watching the junction says the red car driver did jump the red light. The students are asked to discuss whom we should believe and why. Analysis of the case helps the students to become more aware of how a vested interest in an issue may undermine the credibility of the sources, and helps them to recognize the importance of factors such as the experience and professional background of the informants.

As the majority of students tend to rely on the Internet, special attention is given to the criticality needed in selecting cyber sources. It is not uncommon to witness the students holding their mobile phones in one hand and 'finishing their research notes' five minutes before the class. There are also a number of students who base their research solely on Wikipedia texts or personal blogs. To raise the students' awareness of the dangers hidden in uncritical use of the Web resources, I like to use the article '*Will the Net Replace Thinking?*' by Laura Stepp, originally published in *The Washington Post*. The article discusses the changes that the advent of the Internet has brought to education. While the new technology has provided immediate access to an unprecedented amount of information, it has also changed the nature of learning and exposed students to an enormous body of unconfirmed and potentially misleading information. Stepp points out that Web sources tend to present facts and figures rather than classically constructed arguments. She also observes that the sheer number of hits that users get by putting the keywords into a search engine means that students are much more likely just to sample the sources rather than to spend time reading the texts in detail and following their arguments to conclusion. That information is more widely accessible also means that students often end up gathering other people's arguments rather than developing their own. After the students have read the text they are asked to discuss whether they agree or disagree with the writer and to explain their reasons. This discussion prompts the students to examine their own Internet browsing habits and to reflect on their source selection patterns.

Formulating good research questions is another issue of prime concern for the success of research cycles. When choosing a topic, the students are asked to consider what they already know about the topic, what aspects of the topic they would like to know more about, whether other students are likely to be interested in that topic and what they may want to know. They are also taught strategies such as



brainstorming and mind mapping, and they are given some practice in narrowing down general topics to one specific aspect (e.g., *environment* >> *environmental pollution*>> *water pollution* >> *the effects of oil spills on marine life*). The students are also given worksheets like the one provided in Appendix 6 with a list of topics from which they need to select the researchable ones and a list of possible research questions from which they need to distinguish the ones that are okay from those which may be too broad or too narrow.

It is important to remember that all the activities described above are developed only to raise students' awareness about the issues that need to be considered during the process of topic selection and formulation of research questions. Learners' autonomy develops over time through repeated practice. It is through the process of self-reflection, peer input and the teacher's feedback that learners' acquire control over their research process, develop criticality in their selection of sources, learn to define their research questions, synthesize information, contest the arguments and eventually develop informed opinions on the issues they engage with.

#### 4.3 Vocabulary Learning Skills

Vocabulary development is seen as one of the core objectives of the whole curriculum including the Basic Research and Discussion course. Considering that the students are engaged in independent research projects, their vocabulary needs tend to differ. Therefore, special attention is given to the development of their ability to expand their vocabulary knowledge independently of the teacher. The work on vocabulary building encompasses three main dimensions: strategy awareness, dictionary use and the development of collocation knowledge.

Work on vocabulary expansion usually begins with students examining their beliefs about vocabulary learning and reflecting on the strategies they are using or they used in the past to learn English words. (For a sample worksheet, see Appendix 7.) After the introductory class discussion, the students are asked to prepare notes about their vocabulary learning practices, based on which they will give a presentation in the following class. The purpose of this stage is to help the students to learn more about themselves as language learners as well as to make them more aware of a wide range of alternative approaches to vocabulary learning that they may want to explore. Strategies such as semantic grouping, word associations and mnemonics are introduced. Class discussions also examine different ways of dealing with unknown vocabulary such as guessing from context when reading and paraphrasing when speaking. It is important to remember that all the above mentioned strategies are introduced only to raise learners' awareness of the *options* that are available to them rather than teaching them prescriptive rules that they must follow. The students are strongly encouraged to experiment with different ways of recording, learning and using vocabulary, and to critically evaluate their decisions.

Another important component of building learners' autonomy in lexical development is developing their ability to use the dictionaries effectively. A large number of Japanese students tend to use bilingual electronic dictionaries and they rarely look at anything beyond the L1 translation of the target words. In

this aspect, Japanese learners are not alone. A comprehensive study on dictionary use conducted in Europe by Bejoint and Moulin (1987) revealed that as many as 75 per cent of the learners tend to rely on bilingual dictionaries. One reason for this is the comprehensibility of the definitions. Although learner dictionaries tend to use simplified vocabulary, many learners still find them too difficult to understand. These difficulties make some students abandon monolingual dictionaries altogether.

The first step in changing the learners' attitudes is to increase their awareness of the differences that exist among the monolingual dictionaries. For this purpose, I usually use a sheet with four to five definitions of the same word from different English-English dictionaries and then ask the students which ones they like most and why. The purpose of this activity is threefold. It increases the students' awareness of the differences among the dictionaries, it makes them more sensitive to the components of a good definition, and it turns their attention towards different pieces of information that can be included in a dictionary entry.

The use of monolingual dictionaries is also encouraged during students' presentations. When faced with words that seem difficult to explain to their peers, the students are prompted to refer to English-English dictionaries to get the ideas about how their meaning could be conveyed more easily. Over the course of the academic year, the quality of students' vocabulary tends to get better and the frequency with which they use monolingual dictionaries seems to increase.

Equipping students with skills that will allow them to build their knowledge of collocations is crucial for vocabulary development above the intermediate level. As Lewis (2000) observes, the reason why many students struggle with language use and fail to make any perceived progress is that they simply fail to notice which words go together. According to Lewis, a large number of learners tend to identify vocabulary learning with expansion of vocabulary size, that is, adding new words to the lexicon. They are much less likely to be aware of the importance of learning familiar words in new combinations. Therefore, efforts are made to shift learners' attention from quantity to quality of vocabulary knowledge. To introduce the learners to the concept of collocations, I usually give them some examples of 'mis-collocations' in Japanese. By seeing word combinations that convey the meaning but sound unnatural, the students begin to recognize the important role that collocations play in language use. The next step is to help students develop skills that will enable them to learn collocations independently of their teacher. For this purpose, the students are encouraged to record the word combinations they encounter in the source articles. A set of collocation dictionaries is also brought to class and the students are encouraged to refer to these dictionaries to identify the word combinations that could come useful for their presentations. Initially, the students tend to approach collocations uncritically. They often focus on the new words only and copy out all the information available on those words in a collocation dictionary. It is also not uncommon to have students who would approach their teacher after class to ask how many collocations they should record. I am inclined not to give them any specific number on the grounds that setting any kind of a numerical goal is likely to make the students focus on

meeting ‘the quota’ rather than on examining their own goals and needs in vocabulary learning. It takes time, commitment and patience before students learn to notice predictable patterns in the texts, before they learn to be selective in the word combinations they record, and before they learn to really take advantage of the available resources. The efforts made, however, are likely to pay off. Encouraging learner independence in collocation studies is not only beneficial for their lexical development but it is also an important part of the overall process of their becoming more autonomous language learners and users.

#### *4.4 Presentation and Listening Skills*

As the research cycles require students to share their findings every week, the course offers plenty of opportunities to practise presentation and listening skills. Early in the course some class time is devoted to the general presentation structure (i.e., introduction, body, conclusion) and the importance of giving the listeners an overview of the speech, having transitions between the ideas, and using voice inflection. The prescribed phrases common in L2 public speaking textbooks such as ‘*I think smoking should be banned and I will give you three reasons why...*’ have been avoided on the grounds that they do not really reflect the strategies of good public speakers and also for the fear that they may discourage the students from experimenting with the language, reflecting on the problems they experience in the communication process and searching for possible solutions.

At the beginning of the course, I usually show students a DVD of student presentations from earlier years. While these presentations have been considered examples of ‘good work’ that meet the course objectives, they are by no means perfect and they provide ample substance for students to discuss. The students are prompted to evaluate the contents of the presentations, to examine their structure, and the design and the use of their posters, and to pay attention to the different dimensions of the presentation delivery such as the speaker’s eye contact with the audience, his or her voice inflection and so on. Working with presentations prepared by the students who were enrolled in the same programme makes it easier for the students to relate to the issues discussed. At the same time, the fact that the discussions concern the DVD rather than themselves or their peers present in the classroom makes students less hesitant to point out the areas that need improvement. As the students get to know each other better and get used to the research cycles, they are asked to reflect on their presentation experiences and to give each other constructive feedback. The students are encouraged to make their comments as specific as possible. For example, rather than saying ‘*Your presentation was easy to understand*’, they are prompted to think about what features made the presentation easy to understand. Was it the good organization of the speech? Was it accessible vocabulary? Was it that the presenter had prepared a good poster? Similarly, when reflecting on their own work, rather than saying ‘*I need more information*’ (a common comment when students feel their presentation was too short), they are prompted to be specific about the elements in the content they would like to know more about, as well as to examine the possible reasons why they were not able to find sufficient information in the particular stage of the

research cycle. Was it the time they devoted (or were not able to devote) to the research process? Was the problem the research question itself? Did they enter the right key words into the search engine?

Presentations also play a crucial role in developing students' listening skills. While listening to peer presentations, the students are expected to take notes. In order to complete the task, students often have to ask for confirmation or clarification. This approach makes them more attentive to the presentation content and more aware of how far the presentation reflects the depth of the research and the effort put into the planning and practice. In short, it is through the process of continuous critical self-assessment and peer feedback that the students develop a better understanding of what makes a presentation successful.

### **5. Collaboration**

Although the origin of the word 'autonomy' is the Greek word *autonomia*, which means 'having its own laws', autonomy by no means implies freedom from any constraints or an isolation of the individual. As Little (1994, p. 431) points out "learner autonomy does not arise spontaneously from within the learner but develops out of the learner's dialogue with the world to which he or she belongs." Cooperation and co-construction of knowledge are central to the development of the learner autonomy. According to Socio-cultural Theory (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), learning takes place as a result of efforts that individuals make to fill in gaps between their current level of cognitive ability and the needs of their social context. In other words, learning originates and develops in social interaction. People learn from one another via observation, imitation and modeling (Bandura, 1997; Murphy & Arao, 2001). Interaction with other people provides a basis for comparison, and from a young age people model the behaviour that they perceive to lead to positive outcomes (Weiten, Lloyd & Lashley, 1991). The proximity of good near peer models promotes learners' investment in learning and makes them set higher goals for themselves (Murphy & Arao, 2001). This means that in a language classroom peer interaction and teacher-learner interaction are of the utmost importance for the development of learner autonomy.

Peer-interaction provides the essence of the learning environment in the Basic Research and Discussion course. Classroom interaction is founded on the principles of collaborative learning, where students work together to accomplish shared goals and have a responsibility to maximize their own learning and that of their peers (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Through pair work and group discussions, learners increase their level of engagement with the content, and expand their repertoire of both learning practices and linguistic expressions. The students are encouraged to compare their approaches, strategies and techniques at all levels of the research and presentation process from selection of the topics to the content and layout of the visual aids that accompany the final presentations at the end of each research cycle. It is through this process of collaborative reflection that the students take control of their learning, develop their confidence and construct their understanding in English.

The nature of teacher-learner interaction also plays a crucial role in the development of learner autonomy. Developing learner autonomy does not mean simply assigning tasks to the students and leaving them to 'sink or swim'. Teachers should not assume that learners will instantly recognize and appreciate new learning opportunities. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) point out, there is a limit to the amount of change that people can accommodate at any time. For all the opportunities that it may bring, change also brings a feeling of insecurity. Changing one's concept of learning entails changes in self-concept and these changes, if introduced abruptly, may be perceived as threatening. Humans have an inherent need for a consistent and unified picture of themselves and the reality that surrounds them. This need for cognitive consistency means that people are naturally more inclined to assimilate experiences into existing interpretations than to revise them (McCarthy & Schmeck, 1988). Therefore, just giving learners "free choice" and asking them to take responsibility for their learning is more likely to result in confusion and resentment than in interest, satisfaction or a sense of achievement. The changes must come from within the learners themselves, but it is for the teacher to provide opportunities and experiences that are likely to be conducive to these changes and to allow enough time for learners to adjust to them. This means that realizing learner autonomy in a classroom will require a high-level of teacher involvement, but that the time and the nature of that involvement will be directed by the needs of the individual students. This, however, does not mean that the teacher should abandon all course planning. On the contrary, for a learner-centered course to have coherence, teachers must never lose sight of the course objectives. While textbooks inevitably impose constraints on both teachers and learners, their fixed format also provides the structure for the course. Without that structure, there is a danger that the course may lose its direction, resulting in failure to achieve the goals and the frustration of both teachers and learners. For these reasons, the teacher plays a crucial role in the successful implementation and sustaining of a learner-centered classroom environment. It is the teacher's guidance that provides the framework for the course and gives the focus to individual lessons. Teachers must ensure that classroom practices include sufficient routinization to develop the target skills and to reduce the learners' anxiety, and enough variation to maintain the students' interest and give them a clear sense of progress. In short, while in a traditional classroom the teacher is often primarily a transmitter of knowledge, in a classroom where learner autonomy is the goal, the teacher is a manager, a guide, a facilitator, a counselor and a motivator.

These roles can be fulfilled in a number of ways. For example, rather than just telling students to change their research topic because it is too narrow, the teacher can ask them to brainstorm the possible research questions for it. The limited number of ideas usually makes them recognize the limitations of the choices they have made, and the students move on to looking for alternatives without the teacher ever having to explicitly 'ban the topic'. Similarly, rather than just telling students that the way they are taking notes is ineffective, the teacher can prompt them to compare their work with that of their classmates. Alternatively, the teacher can share the examples of a number of approaches to a particular

task and have a whole class discussion on how these approaches differ and the benefits and problems they may entail. Another possibility is to put a list of the ‘problem points’ on the board and have students examine their own work and the work of their peers for possible ‘trouble-shooting’. For example, in the case of posters, the students may consider whether they have too much text, which may be leading their audience to read rather than listen to their presentations, or whether they have any illustrations or pictures that may be aesthetically pleasing but that serve little purpose or even possibly distract the listeners from the content of the presentation.

The teacher’s role is also important when it comes to the management of classroom dynamics. While peer interaction potentially offers ample opportunities for students to engage in reflective negotiation and helps them to learn to appreciate the value of diversity, teachers should not assume that simply placing students in pairs or groups and telling them to work together will result in cooperative efforts. Some students may lack confidence in their English ability and may consequently be reluctant to participate in interactions while others may try to monopolize the conversation. Students’ ability and the amount of preparation have a strong effect on pair/group dynamics. There is some research evidence that suggests that higher-level students may feel discomfort and resentment when they have to work with weaker students. Matthews (1992), for example, reports that stronger students sometimes feel frustrated because they think weaker students are not listening to them and they feel that they can learn more by working with their intellectual peers. However, letting the students have complete freedom in choosing their partners may result in them working with the same classmates every week and deprive them of the opportunity to learn from the diversity of perspectives. For these reasons, students change partners several times in each lesson. This provides learners with multiple opportunities to share their experiences, increase their confidence and fluency, and look into a number of topics from different angles.

In short, by introducing students to different approaches, inviting them to critically reflect on their own work and the work of their peers, and managing their learning opportunities, teachers help learners to discover their beliefs, to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and to feel empowered to assume responsibility for their learning. To be able to complete these multiple and complex roles, teachers need a high level of sensitivity to learners’ needs, a good understanding of the learning process, and capacity to assert their own autonomy. These qualities are developed through experience as well as through formal and informal professional development.

## **6. Teacher Development**

Teachers play a crucial role in the development of learners’ autonomy. Helping learners to break away from old habits requires both theoretical and practical knowledge and experience, as well as a lot of time, energy and patience. Therefore, realizing learner autonomy in the classroom will remain an elusive goal if the teachers lack the necessary skills or commitment to foster it.

The shift in classroom power dynamics and the new roles that the teachers are expected to assume have opened new questions regarding the focus of teacher training courses and the directions for the further professional development of practicing teachers.

Just like in the case of learners, constraints to teacher autonomy can be external or internal. There are teachers who may be open to the idea of learner autonomy but are not in a position to promote it in their classroom owing to the restraints they face in their educational settings such as the national educational policies or the curricular requirements of the particular institution. There are also teachers who still may favour linguistic over communicative competences. Finally, there are teachers who may recognize the value of autonomy in language learning as a new pedagogical paradigm but lack the know-how to integrate it within their classroom. Without adequate knowledge and experience, even teachers who find the idea of fostering learner autonomy intuitively appealing often experience frustration and disappointment when they try to implement it in the classroom (Martinez, 2008; Graves & Vye, 2012). One reason for the failure of their efforts is that many teachers themselves have never experienced learner-centered approaches. Despite the developments in the theory of autonomous learning, there are still many teacher-training programmes that follow a lecture-style model, with a hierarchical transmission of information and few opportunities for collaborative work, decision making and critical reflection. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that teacher development programmes offer student-teachers opportunities to experience autonomy-based learning environments. Development of teacher-autonomy, however, does not stop with pre-service training. As Martinez (2008) points out, to be able to foster autonomous learning, teachers must be aware of how their previous learning and teaching experiences have influenced their assumptions, perceptions and classroom practices. In order to optimize learning opportunities, teachers need to continue to reflect on their practices and to examine the goals and constraints of particular teaching-learning situations. To be able to help their students, to suggest solutions for their difficulties, and to offer them the reassurance they may need, teachers must have a high level of awareness of the problems that learners tend to share, as well as a high level of sensitivity towards specific problems that individual learners may have. They must also have the capacity and willingness to confront their own beliefs, feelings and expectations, and be ready to learn from their students' experiences (Cotterall & Crabbe, 2008).

The realities of the Japanese university employment system, however, mean that, in some ways, promoting the development and autonomy of practicing teachers may be even more challenging than incorporating autonomous practices into the experiences of student-teachers. Japanese universities tend to rely heavily on part-time instructors to reduce personnel costs. According to the data released by MEXT (the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), in 2011 part-time instructors accounted for 51.6 per cent of the teaching staff at the tertiary level. These teachers may come from very different educational and cultural backgrounds and have diverse experiences and very different ideas about the role of education and the nature of language acquisition.

Some instructors may work part-time at several institutions, while the others may hold a full-time job at a different university. Depending on their university's policy, part-time teachers will usually teach one to two days a week. Different schedules make it extremely difficult to organize professional development workshops that everybody can attend, which also means that part-time teachers will usually have little opportunity to meet other teachers working in the same programme but on a different day. In addition to logistical problems, work at several institutions poses challenges for teachers in terms of defining their professional identity, and establishing and maintaining coherence in their beliefs and teaching practices. Each school will typically have its own programme and these programmes may sometimes be developed on very different theoretical assumptions about the nature of language learning, and the roles that teachers and learners should assume. It is not unusual for the instructors to work one day in a programme where they are in a position to decide everything from course objectives to class materials and the criteria for student assessment, only to have to switch to a completely coordinated programme the day after. As they naturally need to adjust to their teaching context, these different and sometimes even contradictory roles that they are expected to assume can make it difficult for teachers to uncover their implicit theories of teaching and language learning.

The university programme introduced in this paper places a strong emphasis on teacher development. Teachers have a number of opportunities to share their ideas and discuss their concerns with both other teachers and the programme coordinators. Prior to the beginning of a new academic year, the teachers are given an opportunity to attend *orientations*, which take the format of semi-formal discussions, where they can share their ideas about the issues such as the structure of the research cycles, skills development, class management and student assessment. Depending on the teachers' availability, several sessions may be offered. About two months after the commencement of the school year, there is an annual Teachers' Retreat, which presents an opportunity for full-time and part-time instructors to share their ideas about classes, to discuss their approaches to particular courses and to make suggestions regarding future curriculum development. The focus of these discussions is negotiated between the teachers and the programme coordinators, and they may take different formats such as poster presentations, pair or small group discussions, or plenary sessions. The Retreat is usually held on a Sunday, so that the majority of instructors can attend. Participation is encouraged, but voluntary. The attendees receive a small financial remuneration from the faculty.

The Retreats play a very important role in the development of the programme. They give teachers a better insight into the whole curriculum and the common areas of focus, as well as greater awareness of the generic problems that the learners in the programme share and possible solutions to them. The exchange of ideas begins several weeks before the Retreat when the teachers are invited to share their ideas for the content of the Retreat discussions. Those suggestions are gathered and grouped by course coordinators who then make them accessible online, so that teachers can continue to offer their comments and exchange ideas based on their areas of concern and interest. The topics proposed by the



teachers are discussed in greater depth during the Retreat and summaries of these discussions are then posted on the university website. These summaries provide a basis for further discussions and are a useful source of reference for the instructors who were not able to attend the Retreat. (For a sample of these discussions, refer to Appendix 8.) The high level of teachers' involvement at both pre- and post-Retreat stages means that Retreats also play an important social role. They present a unique opportunity for teachers to get to know their colleagues better, and they contribute to the spirit of the unity of the faculty and the recognition of the shared sense of mission behind the individual efforts.

Finally, the programme also takes into account the individual developmental needs of its teachers. In the second semester, all instructors have individual consultations with the programme coordinators, which give them an opportunity to talk about their approaches to particular courses in more detail, and to further discuss the direction of the programme in the following academic year. These consultations also present an opportunity for course coordinators to find out more about the individual teachers' beliefs, experiences and possible transitions in their teaching practices.

## **7. Conclusion and Implications**

This paper has looked into some examples of classroom practices that can foster learners' independence and prompt them to take more responsibility for their learning. These practices are built on the assumption that autonomy is a capacity that an individual develops through an increased understanding of the subject matter and the learning principles it involves, as well as through the continuous introspection, and cooperation with others. This model of learning seems to bring about a number of positive changes in students' language and language-learning competence. Over the time the students are less likely to approach research assignments as 'homework tasks they have to do' and more likely to see them as an opportunity to engage with the content they are interested in. As they get more actively involved in their learning, they are also more likely to take a critical stance on their language learning experiences. They become more aware of their learning style preferences as well as the strengths and weaknesses of their learning practices. As a result, they begin to attend more consciously to their language development, and a number of changes in their strategies can be observed. While the nature and the time frame of these changes differ from student to student, most students do seem to discover some new pathways through their language development. Improvements can be observed in the organization of their notes with an increase in the use of symbols, abbreviations, and section headings and fewer instances of indiscriminate copying of the passages from original sources. The students also seem to be more confident when giving presentations and are less likely to read from their notes, which gives them a strong sense of communicative accomplishment, something they often write about in the faculty surveys distributed at the end of each semester. They also tend to become more sensitive to the needs of the listeners, and are likely to pay more attention to whether other students understand the content of their presentations. Likewise, as listeners, they are more likely to take a proactive role and

ask for clarification when necessary as well as to point out to possible gaps in the research and the need for more information. When it comes to vocabulary learning, the students tend to become more selective with regard to the words they record, their use of monolingual dictionaries increases, and they are more likely to pay attention to collocations in texts.

The extent of these transformations will inevitably differ from learner to learner. In addition, the degrees of autonomy that learners display at any given time are also likely to be affected by factors such as perceived task difficulty, group dynamics and motivation. However, even small modifications in learning strategies are important for a number of reasons. They present a movement towards more effective approaches to language learning, which are likely to lead to a higher level of language competence. Furthermore, they are indicative of overall changes in the students' concept of learning, their value systems and their frames of reference. Placing students in a position where they can self-direct their learning helps them to see learning as something more than mere accumulation of facts and the knowledge they gain becomes what Barnes (1976) refers to as 'action knowledge'. This knowledge is qualitatively different from 'school knowledge', that is, the knowledge that is presented to learners by some 'expert', usually the teacher or the textbook writer. While school knowledge may allow students to answer teachers' questions correctly and pass exams, this knowledge is likely to be forgotten as it remains something that exists outside the learner. Action knowledge, on the other hand, is motivated by learners' own purposes is likely to become an integral and lasting component of their views of the world and to serve as the basis of their future actions. Finally, the observed changes in learners' behaviour can be taken as positive evidence that teachers should play an active role in the development of learners' autonomy. Although teachers cannot make learners autonomous, they can provide opportunities and experiences that will allow learners a greater degree of independence and help them gain both the knowledge and the courage needed to take control of their learning.

As discussed earlier, giving learners more power to determine their learning objectives and the content of their learning creates new challenges for teachers with regard to the role that they should assume in the classroom. Teachers should not only give learners' freedom, but should also offer them sufficient support and the stability that will give them confidence, reduce their anxiety, and help them to reach their goals and develop their potential. Rather than making themselves redundant, teachers should become a resource that learners can refer to for help and advice when the need arises. As Harel (1992:169) points out, in a cooperative learning environment, the teacher "interacts, teaches, refocuses, questions, clarifies, supports, expands, celebrates, (and) empathizes." Fulfilling these new and complex roles requires adequate training and time for adjustment. As Trebbi (2008) shrewdly observes, teachers tend to teach they way they were taught, and just trying to convince them of the value of learner autonomy is likely to be insufficient. Without adequate experience, new pedagogical theories and research findings do not seem to translate into improved classroom practices. Realizing autonomy in the language classroom requires autonomous teachers who have both the internal capacity and the

situational freedom to direct their teaching and their learning as teaching practitioners (Smith & Erdoğan, 2008). Therefore, it is important that teacher-training programmes offer adequate education that will enable pre-service teachers to experience an autonomous language classroom. Practicing teachers should reflect on their teaching as well as learning that they can achieve through teaching. They should also actively engage in a dialogue with course coordinators, programme administrators and other teachers about how learners can best be helped to move towards the goal of personal autonomy.

In conclusion, it is clear that autonomy in the language classroom builds on teachers' and learners' acceptance of the new roles they need to take and the awareness of the mutual influences these roles bring. To be able to practice autonomy, both teachers and learners must build a sense of ownership of the concept of autonomy and begin to see themselves as the agents of change. Reflection on the personal beliefs, adopted practices and their outcomes is an essential component of this process. Furthermore, for learning to become a truly transformative experience, collaboration among all the parties involved is of the utmost importance. Learners must be willing to share their experiences with their peers and their teachers, and teachers themselves should open themselves up to opportunities to learn from the experiences of other educators in their field, their colleagues and their students.

Each teaching situation is unique, and it is impossible to develop a "formula" for realizing learner autonomy in a language classroom. What seems to work in one classroom may be met with resistance in another. What is hoped, however, is that at least some of the components of the approaches described above will be implementable in other teaching contexts and that this will prompt the teachers to further experiment with classroom practices that can open up new pathways for realizing the autonomy of their learners.

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### **Appendix 1. Language learning histories (discussion questions)**

1. What languages have you studied? How well can you use each of them?
2. When and how did you start learning English? What memories do you have of this?
3. Are you satisfied with the way languages are taught in Japan?
4. Have you ever studied at a language school? How did you study?
5. Have you ever studied English abroad? Where did you go? How did you study?
6. What is the best English class you have ever had? Why?
7. What is the worst English class you have ever had? Why?
8. Who is the best English teacher you have had? Why?

9. Who is the worst English teacher you have had? Why?
10. What positive and negative experiences have you had of learning English in the classroom? What did you learn from these?
11. "Every child should learn to speak a second language." Do you agree?
12. "Fluency in a language is more important than accuracy." Do you agree?
13. Do you think it's ever possible to speak a language like a native? Do you think that speaking like a native is a desirable goal? Explain your reasons.
14. Do you think age affects a person's ability to learn a new language?
15. How is your personality different when you speak another language? For example, are you more or less outgoing?
16. What motivates you to learn English?
17. What hopes or plans do you have for learning and using English in the future?
18. What do you expect from this course?

#### Appendix 2. Skill knowledge self-assessment

Concept	I understand this concept and feel confident about how to 'do it'	I understand this concept, but I don't feel confident about how to 'do it'	I don't understand this concept or this is a completely new concept for me
<b>I. Learning Skills</b>			
Setting your goals and planning your learning			
Organizing your time and meeting deadlines			
<b>II. Research Skills</b>			
Identifying specific research issues			
Finding suitable sources			
Recording the relevant ideas in note form			
Noting important vocabulary			
<b>III. Presentation Skills</b>			
Organizing a presentation			
Giving a presentation from notes			
<b>IV. Discussion Skills</b>			
Encouraging the audience to discuss what you have presented			
Checking your understanding of what another person says			

Asking for clarification			
Taking turns in discussion			
Keeping going in English			

**Which specific concepts / skills do you want to develop in this course? Why? Please explain in detail here, giving clear reasons:**

**Appendix 3. Planning a self-study schedule**

**For the week from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_**

1. Mark on the chart all the times in the coming week when you **cannot do** self-study for this because of other classes, part-time job, club activities etc.
2. Mark on the chart good times for you to do self-study for this class, like this:

collecting sources

reading and analysis

synthesis / notes

presentation practice

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
13:00							
14:00							
15:00							
16:00							
17:00							
18:00							
19:00							
20:00							
21:00							
22:00							
23:00							
24:00							

**End-of the week reflection:** Were you able to follow your plan? If not, what kind of problems did you have? Is there anything that you can do to prevent these problems from happening again in the future?

#### **Appendix 4. Samples of students' reflections**

##### Sample 1

My presentation is good about contents. Because I researched through many materials. I try to speak correct fact. And I exchanged difficult words to easy words. I made effort to be understood by listener. But, I didn't take care for making poster. If I had made poster clearly, my listener could have comprehended about my presentation. I felt it when I listened my partner's presentation. He made posters clearly. It had many points, many lines and many photos. He used it well, so I was not tired of listening. And he sometimes ask myself "Do you know it? Do you understand?" I didn't feel on one-sidedly. I got many good things from him. I want to make use of them next presentation. What I feel though this presentation is difficulty in explaining by English. Because my note don't have many sentences. I had troubles to make sentences I need to be accustomed to make sentences on that occasion. It is difficult for me to make note without sentences. But I used to make symbols since I begin to study this class. I want to put this presentation to account for next presentation. I want to make presentation by fluently English through this class.

##### Student 2

My goals were the following: 1) to use at least two sources for each note-taking; 2) explaining with / plain easy words – not too much rely on notes.

First, I would like to think about the achievement of goal #1. I used more than two sources in almost all of the weeks of this cycle, so I achieved 85%~90% of this goal. I found that the positive points to use several sources were not only collecting much more and further information but also comparing the standpoints with each other. In this cycle, I researched about Amazon and e-books. From e-reader companies view, Kindle, a kind of e-book from Amazon, the rapid spread of e-book market is positive / good thing, but from the view of publishers it causes decreasing the number of paper book. On the other hand, I didn't improve my notebook well. So I'd like to think about the form and how to write the note. In class, I learned how to improve the note, for example, key words, graphs, abbreviation and so on. In the next cycle, I will use these kind of stuff more.

Next, I'd like to think about #2. My participation in class was active. I talked and discussed almost in English, came up with questions and asked them. And I also asked to use plain words. The goal was almost achieved. I could do presentation without too much rely on my notebook. Through this cycle, I knew that eye contact was quite important in presentation. So, next cycle I'll improve my presentation skills.



Finally, looking back on the whole cycle, the information I had was not enough. It's true it was difficult to find info source, but I tended to read the articles of the newspaper. From next cycle, I'll use many kinds of sources. Through this cycle, I learned many things / found many points I have to improve. I'd like to make the efforts.

#### Appendix 5. Sample of a note-taking practice activity

<u>Student A</u>	<u>Student B</u>
<p><u>Part One (Coaching partner):</u> Read the sentences below slowly and clearly twice.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I've been to many countries, for example, Cuba and Peru.</li> <li>I was too tired, so I decided not to go to the party.</li> <li>.....</li> </ol>	<p><u>Part One (Listening partner):</u> Listen to your partner and take notes.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>_____</li> <li>_____</li> <li>.....</li> </ol> <p>(Sample notes)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>visited many cntrs e.g. Cuba &amp; Peru</li> <li>tired → <del>go the party</del></li> <li>.....</li> </ol>
<p><u>Part Two (Listening partner):</u> Listen to your partner and take notes.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>_____</li> <li>_____</li> <li>.....</li> </ol> <p>(Sample notes)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>gym&gt;&gt;brkfst</li> <li>°C↑→ice↓</li> </ol>	<p><u>Part Two (Coaching partner):</u> Read the sentences below slowly and clearly twice.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>First, I went to the gym. Then I had breakfast.</li> <li>As the temperature increased, the ice melted.</li> </ol>

(Adapted from: Sample Research Topics. *Helping Asian EFL Students Acquire Academic Writing Skills*. Retrieved September 21, 2011 from <http://www.tnewfields.info/Articles/research2.htm>)

#### Appendix 6. Selecting research topics and questions

##### Part One: Selecting a Research Topic

**Instructions:** Look at the topics below and mark the ones that you feel would be suitable for a research project in this class. If you feel that the topic is not appropriate, revise it. Remember, a topic may be inappropriate for any of these reasons:

- it's too broad
- it's too narrow
- it's too simple
- it's too difficult
- it's already been well researched
- not enough information is available

1. The dangers of smoking
2. Attitudes towards slavery in Bhutan in the thirteenth century
3. Love
4. The birthrate in Asia
5. Justin Bieber and the Jonas Brothers: A comparison
6. Disneyland
7. Images of Asian women in Hollywood movies
8. The Higgs boson

(Adapted from: Sample Research Topics. *Helping Asian EFL Students Acquire Academic Writing Skills*.

Retrieved September 21, 2011 from <http://www.tnewfields.info/Articles/research2.htm>)

#### Part Two: Selecting Research Questions

**Instructions:** Look at the questions below and mark the ones that you feel would be suitable for a research project in this class. If you feel that a question is not appropriate, revise it. Remember, a question may be inappropriate for any of these reasons:

- it is difficult to answer that question in ways that are considered ‘objective’
- it is too broad
- it is too narrow
- is too easy or too difficult for the intended audience

1. Do ghosts really exist?
2. How much do most students at this school know about Africa?
3. Why should marijuana be legalized?
4. Who is the greatest Japanese film director?
5. How is the iPhone 4G different from the iPhone 3G?
6. Which is better: Yahoo or Google?

(Adapted from: Sample Research Questions. *Helping Asian EFL Students Acquire Academic Writing Skills*. Retrieved September 21, 2011 from <http://www.tnewfields.info/Articles/research3.htm>)

### **Appendix 7. Discussion questions about vocabulary learning histories, beliefs and goals**

#### Part One: Vocabulary Learning Beliefs and Goals

**Instructions:** Mark the statements that reflect your beliefs and goals about vocabulary learning.

1.  Doing tests forces me to learn vocabulary. At university nobody gives me vocabulary tests, so it's hard to motivate myself.
2.  Using English actively is a great way to learn vocabulary.
3.  An important thing to do when you learn vocabulary is to review your vocabulary notes often.

4.  I think it's more useful for me to focus on learning useful and important phrases rather than on new and individual words.
5.  Checking a word in a Japanese-English dictionary often means forgetting the word a few minutes later.
6.  Nobody has ever really discussed different ways of learning vocabulary with me before, so I feel stuck with memorization and translation.
7.  I think I recognize a lot of words and phrases without any problem, but I can't use them.
8.  I've heard the term 'collocation', but I'd like to know more about what it means.
9.  I have never really thought about effective ways of using dictionaries to help me learn English vocabulary.
10.  I need to decide my own vocabulary goals for myself, so that's good.
11.  Finding better ways to learn English vocabulary is important for me and my future ~~nature~~.

#### Part Two: Vocabulary Learning Histories

**Instructions:** Work in pairs or small groups to discuss the questions below.

1. When did you start learning English and what did you do at the very beginning to learn English vocabulary?
2. Did you learn individual words or did you also learn phrases?
3. Did your way of learning English vocabulary change in junior high school / high school? If so, what did you start to do differently?
4. What do you feel is important to do when you try to learn vocabulary? Why?
5. These days, what do you usually do to learn English vocabulary?
6. In what ways do you feel you are a successful English vocabulary learner?
7. In what ways would it be good to develop your ways of learning English vocabulary?
8. What are some of the similarities and differences that you notice between your own vocabulary learning history, beliefs and goals, and those of other students?

#### **Appendix 8. Sample of teachers' online discussions**

**A:** I am wondering how I can fill the "gap" of time. In our BRD class, I have students work in pairs and talk on their research notes to each other. The problem is that some pairs finish earlier than others. They look bored, or worse, start chatting in Japanese. How can I prevent this from happening?

**B:** Yes, pairs do talk for different periods of time, and it sometimes takes some monitoring to arrange for pairs to exchange partners at different times, and not all at the same time. A number of options come to mind.

If you gave a shorter period the first time for the first round of pairs (for example 10 minutes) explaining their research to each other, you might have fewer pairs wanting to change ahead of the majority in the class. And then the second round you could open it up more and say that 'You probably

need more time this time, so let's go for 15-20 minutes and see if you need more time than that'; I also sometimes write on the blackboard from the second round onwards: *When you are ready to change partners, please put your hand up and look for other students who are also waiting. Then stand up and change partners.* This starts encouraging students to take the initiative, although they may be initially reluctant to do this until they have started to see people starting to stand up and change partners.

**C:** I give students guidelines about the presentation length (for BRD 8min~10 min) before they do their first research project. In class, I usually give them 25 min to half an hour to present and discuss their research in pairs. For most students, that's enough time to present the research and give feedback to their partner. I don't try to pair students who finish early with a new partner immediately. My feeling is that students who finish early usually do not spend enough time on research. I ask them to consider the ways how they could expand it and improve it. If you ask them to write it down, even in a note form, that usually takes them quite a long time.