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# Some Thoughts on Implementing a New Teaching Approach: A Review of Clarke's "Exploring Autonomous Learning . . ."

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This practice-based book review looks at Donna Clarke's (2019) "Exploring Autonomous Learning: A Teacher's Experience and Learners' Perception" in *Autonomy in Language Learning: Getting Learners Actively Involved* (Menegale, 2019). This chapter in the book is a reflection on her first attempt to make her class, at the Japanese School of Brussels, more student-centred. In reviewing the chapter, I reflect on my experience of my first attempt at teaching a semester-long project-based course in relation to some of the key ideas discussed by Clarke. In doing so, I discuss the concerns, successes, and challenges that we shared and faced in incorporating a teaching approach that was new to us both. I also take a close look at the methodology that she used in her study. Finally, I conclude this book review by considering how I would respond to Clarke's four questions that she frames her action research with.

本稿はAutonomy in Language Learning: Getting Learners Actively Involved (Menegale, 2019)に収められているDonna Clarke (2019)の"Exploring Autonomous Learning: A Teacher's Experience and Learners' Perception"の書評である。本書のこの章は、ブリュッセル日本人学校でのClarke自身の授業をより学習者中心にするための初めての試みについての考察である。この章を振り返りながら、Clarkeが論じた重要な考え方に関連して、筆者が初めて試みた1学期間を通してのプロジェクトベースの授業の経験を振り返ってみた。私たち双方にとって新しい教育アプローチを取り入れる際に共有し、直面した懸念、成功、課題について論じる。また、Clarkeが研究に用いた方法論についても考察する。最後に、Clarkeがアクション・リサーチの枠組みとして掲げた4つの質問に対して、私ならどう答えるかを考えてこの書評を締めくくる。

## Keywords

Japanese university students, learner-centred approach, out-of-class learning, project-based learning, reflection  
日本の大学生、学習者中心のアプローチ、授業外学習、プロジェクトベースド学習、リフレクション

Donna Clarke's (2019) "Exploring Autonomous Learning: A Teacher's Experience and Learners' Perception" in *Autonomy in Language Learning: Getting Learners Actively Involved*, edited by Marcella Menegale (2019), is a reflection on her attempt to make her class more student-centred. Reading it reminded me of when I first taught a semester-long project-based course in the English Language Programme (ELP) at a university in central Japan. Like Clarke, at that stage of my career and without a background in education or TESOL/TEFL, I was unfamiliar with the concept or practice of learner autonomy.

This practice-based book review is an extended reflection on my first attempts to implement a more learner-centred approach in the classroom, in relation to some of the key ideas discussed by Clarke. The students' comments I refer to in this review were collected on the last day of classes with their consent for the data to be used in any future research or publication. My notes were recorded on the lesson plans that I prepared in my notebook for each class and included my classroom observations with comments on how I might do things differently in the future.

## Clarke's Study

Clarke conducted action research when she first attempted to switch from a teacher-centred classroom to a more learner-centred one. Her study took place at the Japanese School of Brussels between April and July in 2011. It was an immersion-style class in which she spoke in English only, and the curriculum focused on English for travel purposes. The students were aged between 14 and 15 years of age and met three times a week for 45 minutes. She had a Japanese support teacher in each class, whose role is not specified in the chapter.

Data for Clarke's study comprised a diary she kept during her year teaching, learning journals her students were required to keep, a questionnaire, and several interviews she conducted with students based on gender and ability. The questionnaire used a 4-point Likert scale and was submitted to the author by the last day of the term. Clarke writes that the students were given one week to return it to her. The learning journals were kept throughout the year, but how frequently they were kept and when they were submitted are unclear. The interviews were conducted before the questionnaires were collected at the end of the semester.

Clarke's discussion is focused on two main concerns she had incorporating autonomous learning in her classroom: first, the novelty and unfamiliarity of the practice, and secondly, her concern not to impose upon her students a Western form of learning. These two concerns are elaborated in terms of four central questions that frame her reflections:

1. Could the approach be implemented successfully?
2. If she encountered problems with implementation, would she be able to find solutions?
3. Would the students' cultural backgrounds inhibit their autonomous learning engagement?
4. Would the students see the approach as advantageous to their learning?

Clarke's second concern, that she not impose on her students a Western form of learning, is based on the notion that autonomy is a concept "central to European liberal-democratic and liberal humanist thought" (Pennycook, 1997, p. 42). Her concern was founded in personal observations and literature she had read which stated that Japanese students, often coming from traditions of obedience to authority, see teachers as figures who convey knowledge rather than as mentors who facilitate learning (Liu, 2008). However, Clarke was also guided by other researchers that discussed the possibility of succeeding with autonomous learning within a Japanese educational context (e.g., Dias, 2000; Sakai et al., 2010).

Clarke's two concerns can be related to Dam's (2019) discussion (also in the same volume edited by Menegale) regarding the teacher's role in the classroom. In a teacher-centred classroom, the teacher's role is clear, as they are positioned at the front instructing the students. However, with a learner-centred approach, the teacher's role may be more ambiguous. How much they get directly involved with the students, and to what extent they address or approach the students, is very much a negotiated practice. This is challenging for instructors as well as students, although perhaps particularly with Asian students, who are generally perceived to be more passive and to expect teachers to simply tell them what to know (Littlewood, 1999; Liu, 2008).

Clarke does not specify how she organised her classes, nor the methods she used to implement more autonomous learning, what the students were assigned to do in each class, or how this was all different from what she did before. The reader however can infer from her questionnaire results that the students were able to direct their classroom learning, for example, choosing which units of the textbook to study, what activities to do, and which expressions to remember. The students also seem to have been able to choose their own homework.

Details aside, Clarke found implementing her new learner-centred pedagogical approach challenging, but her students responded positively. For example, the questionnaire results showed that 85% of the students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that teachers should be responsible for choosing classroom activities, 78% of the students appreciated being able to choose which units from the textbook to study, and 69% found choosing their homework to be useful for their learning.

On the other hand, she also discovered that students found working in groups to be a challenge. The questionnaire did not ask for feedback on group work, but responses from all four interviewees showed that they did not have positive impressions. Clarke speculates that part of the reason for this may be that students did not have enough time to experience the benefits of support and feedback from others in their group work.

### ***Clarke's Action Research Methodology***

Clarke's data collection is unclear on two points, which, if clarified would give more insight into the strength of her methodology. First, she mentions that her students had one week to complete and submit the course questionnaires and that the interviews took place before the questionnaires were due. Therefore, the interviews took place before the semester had fully ended. Thus, although the students were told that participating in the interview would not affect their grades, one wonders whether they were comfortable sharing their thoughts on their teacher's pedagogy, especially if their feedback may have been critical. Furthermore, the questionnaire was administered on a 4-point Likert scale (i.e., *strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree*), which may have influenced some students' response as it did not provide a neutral option for those who neither agreed nor disagreed. If Clarke had chosen to use an even number of options on the questionnaire, so as to force the respondents to choose a particular position or perspective, some explanations might have been helpful for understanding why she did this.

The second point regards whether the students' learning journals were included in their grade assessment. Clarke says she asked her students to keep learning journals "throughout the year" (p. 26) but does not specify how often the students were required to keep them, nor whether she collected them before the end of the semester. These points are important because keeping a learning journal might seem like a lot of work for students if it is not part of their grade, which, in my experience, would discourage many students from writing their learning journals regularly. The content of the journals might also turn out to be superficial and not reflect students' real views. If the journals were not collected or checked on a regular basis, some students may even have completed all their reflections in a short time before submitting them.

A related concern regarding students' journals is that they were asked to make their entries in the target language. Citing Dam and Little (1999), Clarke emphasises the value and appropriateness of using the target language as a way for students to develop their skills. However, she also writes that her students struggled with their journals because

of difficulty expressing themselves in English. While I agree with Dam and Little on using the target language to develop language skills, one wonders what perspectives or insights the students may have shared were they permitted to write in their first language. Clarke does of course mention the difficulty she would have had reading the journals in the students' first language, but her comprehension may have been prioritised at the cost of the content and quality of the students' feedback.

### **My First Attempt at Student-Centred Learning**

The class I taught involved first-year advanced-level students, who were classified as "advanced" based on the university's classification. They were aged 18 or 19, and most of them had spent some of their earlier years living and studying outside Japan or came from a culturally mixed background. Only a few students, three out of 20, had not experienced any schooling whatsoever outside Japan. From previous teaching, I was familiar with having students work in groups for discussions and presentations, but this course was different in two ways. First, unlike most of the 90-minute-per-week, one-semester courses I had taught until then, this course was held twice a week for 90 minutes, and I was teaching the same group of students for two successive semesters. Second, most of the course design was open to my determination including whether to use a textbook and, if so, which textbook. The only instructions issued by the ELP were that students in the first semester were to learn reading skills and writing skills, and in the second semester they were to practice those skills through project-based learning.

Accordingly, I had more control of the content and schedule in the first semester, given the students' need to develop particular skills, and the students had more control in the second. Thus, in the first semester, students were directed to complete assigned tasks on reading, writing, and presentations in each class. In the second semester, by contrast, students decided which topics they would study and how they would use the time in each class. Apart from a few deadlines I set for submissions, including a project schedule and weekly progress reports, groups were free to decide how they would manage their learning. My role in the second semester was focused on tracking how well they were completing their projects, providing support for identified issues, and occasionally offering advice to the whole class if a group was encountering difficulties.

At the beginning of the second semester I did not share Clarke's concerns, as I assumed that a more learner-centred approach would be welcomed by the students. This confidence, however, was somewhat misplaced. Although most students actively communicated with each other and participated in group work, my classroom observations and the students' end-of-semester reflections showed some were clearly lost in their classroom autonomy.

For example, Ayaka (pseudonym) showed a considerable change in behaviour from the first semester to the second. In the first semester, she actively responded to my instructions and was never late handing in assignments. She was also usually first to respond to questions I would pose to the class. In the second semester, I kept my instructions to a minimum to allow groups to expand their ideas in their own ways and only ask for guidance when they felt necessary. Ayaka's work fulfilled the minimum of my instruction but did not go beyond, and she was far less active in the classroom and in group work. In the end-of-semester reflection she wrote, "In the first semester, I felt I was learning something new from the teacher every week. I don't feel like I learnt anything new in the second semester."

On the other hand, and similar to Clarke's findings, there were also pleasant surprises. Kosuke (pseudonym) was a quiet student who rarely interacted with other students in the first semester. Initially, I had concerns about how he would cope with the second semester's student-centred approach. Kosuke, however, not only actively worked on the group project, but also pursued his interests and asked lots of questions, both during class and via email. In his end-of-semester reflection he wrote how much he had enjoyed working on the project with his group and that he understood why the first semester had been taught as it had: to provide him and his fellow students with the necessary skills for the following semester.

Ayako and Kosuke demonstrate that not all activities or teaching approaches are welcomed by all students, an issue that most teachers probably face. Dam (2019) discusses how "letting go and taking hold" (p. 96) is an ongoing challenge for teachers trying to allow more autonomy for students in learning, both inside and outside the classroom. Students need leeway to learn in their own ways, but still need guidance in how to do this: Teachers cannot be completely hands-off. How much teachers should let go seems even harder when considering work outside the classroom. With group work in particular, if work is assigned for outside the classroom, then teachers need to monitor how each individual is contributing, or students may be treated unfairly. One way of dealing with this is to "let go" of homework assignments and allow students to manage their course workload themselves.

Clarke's findings revealed that 69% of her students were happy to be able to decide on their own homework. Assigning homework or out-of-class learning was not something I considered in my second semester. Throughout the course, groups worked at their own pace, managing their project schedules, and deciding what work to do in or out of the classroom. The amount of homework they chose to do was therefore an uncontrollable factor for me. Even mentioning work outside of the classroom was not something I wanted to do, since it might have come across as interference or made some students feel I did not see them as responsible.

At the end of the semester I found that all groups had managed their projects successfully and independently. Moreover, one student went far beyond the first semester's standards, teaching himself how to make a website to better present his group's findings. I had expected students to make slides for their final presentations on the basis of the first semester presentation skills they had studied. The student explained in his end-of-semester comments that he had suggested creating a website to his group and the group had collectively agreed to it. Making the website may not have helped the student improve his English language skills, but the opportunity to discover new interests and pursue them was invaluable.

This case may be a clear example of how "taking hold" and "letting go" at the right time can be effective regarding outside-the-classroom work. Indeed, looking back at the student reflections I collected, no one referred to the amount of homework they had given themselves. Reading Clarke's chapter made me consider, however, whether I should have considered asking the students what they thought about having control over their own homework. Given the case of Ayaka, for example, I wonder if I sometimes let go of the students too much, and whether I should have sometimes held on more.

## Final Reflection: Considering Clarke's Four Questions

In closing, I return to the four central questions that Clarke uses to frame her reflections on her action research. In so doing, however, I should note that whilst Clarke's reflections are central to her study, mine are speculations based on my notes and the comments I received from my students. Clarke's first and second questions concern the instructor's discomfort or anxiety in transitioning from a teacher-centred approach to a more learner-centred approach and embracing the idea of instructors "letting go" (Dam, 2019). Her third and fourth questions concern the students' discomfort in becoming more autonomous in their learning. In order for a new teaching method to "work" in the classroom, a certain amount of confidence is required from both the teacher and the students, in themselves and each other. Instructors need to have confidence in their ability to use the teaching method and in the students' capacity to engage with it. Students, on the other hand, need to have confidence in themselves and in the value of learning in a way they are unfamiliar with.

For my own part, when designing the course for the second semester, I had confidence both in the course structure and the students' ability to autonomously learn. I was also not concerned about imposing a Western concept on the students nor with finding solutions if problems arose. This was due to my experience in the first semester, because most of the students had schooling experience outside Japan, and because I assumed any problems that arose would be minor.

Kosuke proved that the course could be successful, and his work in the second semester rewarded my confidence that the students could autonomously learn. Ayaka, on the other hand, was one of the students who had studied abroad, so my assumption that she would be prepared for autonomous learning was misplaced. Moreover, my efforts to help her and other struggling students may not have been enough. The question then is whether my overall confidence in the course was too strong or not. It could be that some students need more preparation before being able to fully benefit from autonomous learning, or it could also be that some may only recognise the benefits of a learner autonomy approach afterwards when they later reflect back on their learning experiences. Conversely, another possibility is that some students may just not be interested in autonomous learning.

In autonomous learning, students need to take initiative in solving their own inquiries. As the process itself is a learning opportunity for them, it is my continuing hope that my students will eventually move away from the teacher-as-guru model to see learning as an engaged and participatory effort between themselves and me as their instructor. Therefore, I conclude, as Clarke concludes, that for instructors to organise a more autonomous classroom, communication with the students so they understand and appreciate the methods used may be required.

## Author Bio

**Mizuka Tsukamoto** (EdD) has been involved in English education at universities in Japan for over 10 years. Her research interests include learner/teacher autonomy, teacher education and development, and teachers' professional lives.

## Review Process

This paper was blind peer-reviewed by members of the *Learner Development Journal* Review Network and the Journal Steering Group. (Contributors have the option of open or blind review.)

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