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## Challenging the Conventions of Learner Development Research

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# The Role of Practitioner Research in Exploring Learner Autonomy for In-Service Teachers: A Retrospective Case Study

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This retrospective case study investigated the role of practitioner research in nurturing learner autonomy among in-service teachers, with a focus on a junior high school English teacher. In the context of English language education in Japan, where traditional academic research often overshadows practitioner research, this study challenges conventional perceptions and highlights the value of teacher-initiated practitioner research in professional development. Over two years, the teacher engaged in practitioner research, emphasizing self-expression and creativity in his classes. His practice aligns with sociocultural theories of language learning by fostering autonomy through social interaction and student collaboration. The study reveals how creative tasks played a pivotal role in developing learner autonomy. Students embraced autonomy as communicators, learners, and individuals. The study also showcases the significance of teacher autonomy in supporting learner autonomy. The teacher's ability to exercise discretion within curriculum constraints exemplifies the potential for teacher-initiated change. The teacher's two-year period of doing practitioner research and supporting his students' self-expression and creativity journey can serve as a model for teachers aspiring to promote learner autonomy and development.

本事例研究は、中学校の英語教師に焦点を当て、教師が学習者の自律をどのように促すかを、現職教師によって行われた実践研究を一事例として振り返る形で探究した。実践研究が伝統的な学術研究の影に隠れがちな日本の英語教育の文脈において、本研究は従来の認識に疑問を呈し、教師の成長を促す意味での教師主導の実践研究の価値を強調するものである。対象となる英語教師は、2年間にわたり、授業における自己表現と創造性を重視しながら実践研究に取り組んだ。彼の実践は、社会的相互作用と生徒間の協力を通して自律性を育むことにより、言語学習の社会文化理論に沿ったものである。本研究では、授業中と創造的な課題が、学習者の自律性を育む上で極めて重要な役割を果たしており、生徒たちは、コミュニケーター、学習者、そして個人としての自律性を育てていることが明らかとなった。本研究では、学習者の自律性を支える教師の自律性の重要性も示している。カリキュラムの制約の中で裁量権を行使する教師の能力は、教師主導の変化の可能性を示している。彼の2年間にわたる実践研究と生徒の自己表現と創造性を支援する歩みは、学習者の自律と成長を促す教師のモデルとなるだろう。

## Keywords

practitioner research, learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, creativity, professional development  
実践研究、学習者の自律、教師の自律、創造性、専門能力開発

## Introduction: Challenging Conventions by Doing Practitioner Research

A positivist paradigm emphasizing the objective and quantifiable pursuit of knowledge is predominant in the English language education field in Japan. As a result, practitioner research by school teachers is sometimes perceived by Japanese scholars to be less valuable compared to typical academic quantitative research. This perception stems from the view that such research is not considered scientific and is of poor methodological quality. On the contrary, in this retrospective case study, we explore the empowering role

of practitioner research in enhancing learner and teacher autonomy over time in one teacher's sustained engagement with autonomy-building practice.

Since 2014 we have been involved in a research project focused on promoting practitioner research, collaborating with several school teachers and teacher educators. Our engagement with practitioner research is driven by a shared fascination with its nature, specifically its focus on understanding and improving teachers' practices. This diverges from the objectives of academic research, which is fundamentally oriented towards advancing academic disciplines. Our interest was fueled by a project initiated by the Chubu English Language Education Society, an organization in which we are active members. The purpose of this project is to identify how practitioner research by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers can be conducted and supported. One of the integral members of this project is Naoya Miyazaki, who is the central focus of this article. We (Akiko Takagi, Takeo Tanaka, and Yuki Minami) decided to collaborate in writing this paper because Naoya's practice stands out in terms of promoting learner autonomy through practitioner research. We believe that depicting his two-year journey will serve as an excellent model for secondary teachers who aspire to foster autonomy in their classrooms.

Two of the authors, Akiko and Takeo, have been research group members from the start of the project in 2014. We have both been involved in pre- and in-service teacher education and have supported practitioner research for the past nine years. However, we have different backgrounds and interests as researchers and educators. While Naoya was carrying out his own research into promoting learner autonomy, we sometimes had an opportunity to discuss his research progress, his views on his class and students, and his beliefs about teaching in face-to-face meetings with the other project members. Yuki, who joined the team three years ago, has been engaged in reflective practice as a teacher-researcher.

Naoya is an English teacher at a public junior high school. After obtaining a master's degree in English education, he taught for 13 years in three public schools, and he has worked as a supervisor on a city board of education in Shizuoka since 2021. He started his practitioner research in 2014. We chose Naoya as the participant for this case study because he has been engaged in practitioner research over an extended period of time. Furthermore, without overloading himself in his work, he has carefully analyzed and reflected on his students' development based on data collected from his daily practice. Naoya has published three articles in *The Chubu English Language Education Society Journal*, one of which, "Student and teacher growth observed during two years of continuous expressive activities" (Miyazaki, 2018), focused on students' growth through creative expressive activities for over two years. Although he did not use the term "autonomy" explicitly in his paper, his study vividly depicts the students' development of learner autonomy with the support of the teacher. After two years of practitioner research with first- and second-year students, Naoya reflected on how he now saw his role as teacher: "I have changed my view about my role. I now care more about bringing the students to a level at which they can express themselves freely and how to scaffold them to do so" (Miyazaki, 2018, p. 187).

## Practitioner Research and Purpose of the Study

Practitioner research (PR), is a type of research conducted by teachers with the purpose of helping themselves and other educators better understand their practice and/or improve their teaching. It enables teachers to explore issues related to learner development,

including learner autonomy, in their specific teaching contexts and to examine their professional development. Action research, exploratory practice, reflective practice, and narrative inquiry are well-known forms of PR, as shown in Hanks's (2017) family tree of PR. Despite the meaningfulness of PR, it is poorly valued by some academic researchers not only in Japan but also elsewhere. As Borg (2010) lamented: "The common criticism of teacher research that it is of poor quality, methodologically-speaking, is also often underpinned by conventional scientific notions of research (e.g., large-scale, replicable, quantitative)" (p. 405). Furthermore, some school teachers may find the theories and methodologies associated with established PR frameworks overwhelming because they lack sufficient time and opportunity to engage in PR and apply the knowledge to their teaching practices.

Nunan (1997) argued that PR, even if it is contextualized and focused on specific matters, should meet the standards that apply to other types of empirical research. We do not support this assertion; rather, we believe that teachers should be encouraged to explore puzzles and questions in class without being subjected to academic research criteria, which would simply add another burden in their busy environments. As shown in Hanks (2017), PR can take many forms and contribute to teacher development. We believe teachers should be made aware that PR is feasible in their teaching practice, and its results should be meaningfully shared with their colleagues to facilitate professional development. In fact, in their daily routines as practitioners, teachers regularly observe their classes, check students' assignments, as well as record, and also share, their practices.

Considering PR to be a powerful tool for practitioners to understand and improve their practice, this study qualitatively explored how a junior high school English teacher supported students' autonomous learning and what factors he considered for autonomous learning. By looking at his practice from multiple perspectives, we came to understand how the teacher emphasized the development of learner autonomy for his junior high school students. In our exploration, we analyzed the 2018 article and used a follow-up interview with Naoya to investigate his perceptions of his practice and determine how he promoted learner autonomy. To guide our investigation, we formulated the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ 1. What were the practitioner's perceptions of the roles of the students and the teacher in English language classes?

RQ 2. How did the practitioner promote his students' autonomous learning?

## Naoya's Practice

In this section, we provide an overview of Miyazaki's (2018) paper. In his study, he investigated how he and the students in his English class developed as a teacher and as learners, respectively, for a period of over two years, placing emphasis on self-expression activities. The participants comprised four classes (about 32 students per class) of first-year students in their first year of junior high school and second-year students (the same cohort of first-year students). The students' English proficiency ranged from Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels A1 to A2, which is typical for Japanese public junior high school students. Referring to the *Course of Study* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008), Naoya defined "self-expression" as "students' expressions of their feelings and thoughts in English without worrying about particular grammatical rules" (Miyazaki, 2018, p. 183).

Naoya divided his practice and the students' growth into the following six phases: (1) the teacher explores class policies and decides to place expression activities at the center of the class; (2) changes are observed in the students in the class; (3) the students start enjoying cooperative activities in English; (4) the students start to care about the audience; (5) the students begin to enjoy their self-expression freely; and (6) the students reflect on what has influenced them and convey their thoughts to their classmates. Phases 1–3 occurred during the first year, whereas Phases 4–6 took place during the second year. Table 1 shows the self-expression activities that Naoya created over these six phases with his students with the textbook content, all of which required creative writing by the students.

**Table 1.** *Summary of Student Activities*

Timeline	Example student activities
Phase 1 (April–July 2015)	Creating a poem
Phase 2 (August–December 2015)	Writing a composition about “My dream school” with a picture
Phase 3 (January–March 2016)	Writing a composition about “My dream tool” with a picture
Phase 4 (April–July 2016)	Creating original text for a textbook
Phase 5 (October–December 2016)	Writing a continuation of the story “Red Demon and Blue Demon,” which the students read in the textbook; the story is set 10 years in the future
Phase 6 (January–March 2017)	Writing a composition about things that shaped or influenced who they had become

In his 2018 paper, Naoya reviewed two years of practice based on the following: (a) the students' English compositions, (b) video and audio recordings during interactive speaking practice and small group activities, (c) student statements that he had recorded, and (d) his teaching journal.

In his teaching Naoya placed expressive activities such as writing and speaking at the center of the syllabus, but, at the beginning of his two-year practitioner research project, he was not completely sure how he would manage his class. He consolidated his teaching policy through the process of reconciling the actual situations of the students with the wishes of the teacher.

## Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy

Learner autonomy is popularly defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3), but it has since been defined in various other ways. It is now generally accepted that learner autonomy must be viewed from multiple points of view. Naoya’s practice is special in that it involved extensive interaction between the teacher and the students, as well as between the students themselves during classroom activities, which enhanced students’ creativity. Therefore, in this study, we focused on the affective, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions of learner autonomy (Benson, 2007) in relation to learner creativity and teacher autonomy.

One of the two sociocultural perspectives proposed by Oxford (2003) involves socially mediated learning, heavily relying on Vygotsky’s (Cole et al., 1978) work. According to Vygotsky, learner development progresses from other-regulation to self-regulation through interaction with others, eventually leading to autonomy. Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as a theoretical framework for learning and

development. In the ZPD, learners collaborate with others to bridge the gap between their current abilities and their potential, with the help of guidance. Initially, learners receive support from more knowledgeable individuals, gradually enabling them to perform tasks independently. To bridge the gap between learner autonomy and self-regulation, the tasks that learners can do on their own should align with their self-regulation abilities (Murray, 2014). Applying Vygotsky's work to L2 learning, Lantolf (2000) emphasized the point that, in sociocultural theory, the relationship between people and the world is mediated through language as a tool for thought, rather than the acquisition of cognitive knowledge at an individual level. A key concept in sociocultural theory for language learning is "participation" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). To become competent language speakers, learners benefit from collaborative interaction with others to negotiate meaning and problem-solve in the ZPD. In this sense, task-based learning is considered to promote learner autonomy, as learners are viewed as language users and social communicators, with teachers serving as facilitators of communication and mediators in students' language development in a cooperative and self-directed learning environment (Vieira, 2017).

Next, we would like to emphasize the significance of creativity in relation to autonomy, as creativity plays a pivotal role in Naoya's practice. Littlewood (1996) proposed that autonomy comprises three types: autonomy as a *communicator*, autonomy as a *learner*, and autonomy as a *person*. Following Littlewood's definition, Tin (2018) regarded the first type as a micro level of autonomy, where learners take charge and make choices regarding the creative use of language in language learning tasks. Tin saw the other two types as macro levels of autonomy, where learners make decisions and choices about their learning. She argued that creativity, defined as the production of new ideas through creative thinking, plays a crucial role in promoting learner autonomy through communication. She further pointed out that creativity empowers learners to take control and transform their language. Drawing on sociocultural theory, Chappell (2016) viewed creativity as a social activity rather than an individual one in a language classroom. He asserted that an essential part of learning is the intervention or mediation of others, namely a teacher or peers, between the learner and the knowledge and skills to be acquired. In conclusion, it is evident that creativity not only enriches learner autonomy but also supports the role of social interaction in nurturing students' development as autonomous learners.

Teacher autonomy is closely interconnected with the development of learner autonomy (Manzano Vázquez, 2018). Benson (2007) referred to teacher autonomy as primarily to the freedom of the teacher to exercise discretion in the implementation of the curriculum. Expanding on this, Dikilitas (2020) further explored the concept of teacher autonomy by surveying 15 language teachers. He identified four major themes: teachers being reflective, developing learner autonomy, being self-directed, and cultivating freedom for themselves and learners. The fourth theme related to the ability of teachers to cultivate freedom in terms of what they can teach beyond the curriculum and their decision to use methods beyond those prescribed by schools. Especially in secondary school settings, teacher autonomy tends to be constrained by English language curriculum guidelines, syllabi, exams within schools, and educational policies and regulations. However, teacher autonomy can be cultivated depending on the interests and internal capacities of individual teachers (Benson, 2010). Dikilitaş (2020) furthermore argues that, in order to overcome contextual constraints, teacher autonomy should be developed in sustainable ways. To this end, PR may help teachers explore answers to their questions in their own classroom contexts.

So, what are typical qualities that pro-learner autonomy teachers exhibit, and how has learner autonomy been typically investigated until now? According to Breen and Mann (1997), teachers who seek to promote learner autonomy in the classroom possess the following characteristics: a clear perception of themselves as learners, a belief and trust in their learners' ability to learn and act autonomously, and a genuine desire to foster learner autonomy in the classroom. To determine how the autonomy of English language learners has been studied, Chong and Reinders (2022) conducted a literature review of 61 empirical studies on learner autonomy (some of them in Japanese EFL settings) with a focus on English language learning. They reported that most of the studies had been conducted in higher education institutions and language schools and were quantitative, often using questionnaires. Notably, few studies have qualitatively explored how language teachers perceive learner autonomy and how they support learners in Japanese secondary classrooms. Therefore, our study was aimed at filling this gap in the literature.

## Research Design

We employed a retrospective case study as the research design. A retrospective case study is "a type of longitudinal case study design in which all data, including first-person accounts, are collected after the fact" (Street & Ward, 2010, p. 825). Although we had not directly observed Naoya's practice, by examining his article and interviewing the author, we were able to investigate his longitudinal PR from a new perspective: learner autonomy. Additionally, given the limited length of the paper (eight pages), we aimed to gain a more detailed understanding of his practice as well as of his underlying beliefs and thoughts that were not fully articulated in what he had written. There was a four-year gap between Naoya's publication of PR and our interview with him. However, it was still worth interviewing him based on the article because it marked a turning point in his practice through PR. We were able to delve into his practice by referencing the concrete written evidence that reflected his beliefs and thoughts, and Naoya vividly remembered his practice based on his own writing. We believed that the passage of time would allow him to reflect more objectively on his practice. Moreover, we could gain insights into how he continued his practice after this period, even though it was not the primary focus of our study. We felt that this methodology would be suitable for clarifying how the practitioner nurtured learner autonomy in his English language classes for a prolonged period. The interview, based on his paper (Miyazaki, 2018), provided rich data, which we used to thoroughly explore the participant's experiences and perceptions. This methodology enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of Naoya's practices by metacognitively investigating his practices, without placing an overly large burden on him.

## Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted a semi-structured in-depth interview with Naoya via Zoom in July 2022 to explore his perspectives regarding the roles of teachers and students in English classes as well as his perceptions of the development of his students' autonomy through expressive activities. Toward this end, we asked him to reflect on his experiences while completing his study, based on the article (Miyazaki, 2018) that he had written. The interview, which lasted for about 1 hour and 45 minutes, was audio-recorded and transcribed. Naoya mainly talked about his experiences during his study, and to a lesser extent before and after it. The interview questions (see the Appendix for details) included his beliefs about teaching, perceptions and ways of supporting his students' learning and development,

and the role of PR in understanding and improving his practice. In terms of ethics, Naoya fully understood the purpose of this study and was happy to share his thoughts and reflections on his practice based on his published article and beyond. In addition, we had built trust through our project, which aims to support the professional development of busy school teachers.

We used Naoya's article and the interview data in the analysis. For the data analysis, we employed a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) following the six steps prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2022). A reflexive TA fully embraces qualitative research values (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In a reflexive TA, coding is open and organic, and theme generation is regarded as a creative and active process. Codes capture at least one facet, but themes need to capture multiple facets of shared meanings in the data.

Akiko began by examining the data, followed by a discussion of the results among us, which allowed for the data to be assessed from multiple perspectives. As the first step, Akiko familiarized herself with the data and inductively coded Naoya's paper and the interview transcription by using a software package for qualitative data analysis (MAXQDA, 2022). She then transferred the coded data into Excel and collated the codes into potential themes to search for patterns. After reviewing all the themes, Akiko defined and named them, then modified, deleted, or combined the identified themes where necessary. She moved back and forth between the stages of analysis recursively to obtain the final themes. After the analysis was finished, Akiko shared the data with Takeo and Yuki to check the appropriateness of the themes and the process of theme development and to enhance dependability (Koch, 2006). Some themes were revised at this stage. We then discussed our interpretations of the data. We shared our thoughts on the potential of PR for investigating the relationships among autonomy, creativity, and other aspects of learner development. Our intent was to deepen our analysis and interpretation as well as to enhance our own reflections on the issues that would emerge during our discussions through our different positionalities. Using member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we also asked Naoya to confirm whether our analysis and interpretation were convincing and credible. Finally, we translated the Japanese data into English so as to report the results in the Findings section.

## **Findings**

### ***RQ1: Naoya's Perceptions on the Roles of the Students and the Teacher***

We report two overarching themes developed through the analytical process for RQ 1, namely the students as the main actors in the class and the teacher as facilitator.

#### ***Students as the Main Actors in the Class***

Naoya had been teaching third-year students for several years at schools in Shizuoka, so it was quite refreshing for him to start with first-year students without really knowing how they were doing. He assumed that they would be able to express themselves in English to some extent. However, he realized that first-year students struggled to express themselves in English even if they wanted to do so. Despite their struggles, he believed in their inherent capability to learn and express themselves, and he regarded his students as proactive learners. Naoya said, "I thought that if I let the students try, they would be able to do it, as long as I gave them the support they needed and hints to help them think" (Interview, 17 July 2022).



According to his article, Naoya had a clear vision of his students' learning from the start of his practice. He wanted his students to be able to communicate their thoughts with each other in class. At the same time, he hoped to nurture the students' empathetic attitude so that they would listen to and accept others' stories and thoughts. As his ultimate goal, he wanted each student to find an answer to the reason for their learning English for three years in junior high school. In the following part of the interview, Naoya describes how he viewed the meaning of learning English for his students:

Unlike in Tokyo or Osaka, there are very few students who go abroad, and most of them spend their entire lives in the local community or come back after leaving. There are many students who work hard on their English but will not use it in the future. I think that's fine, but it would be nice if they had some kind of experience of being exposed to a foreign country or something gained from their foreign language experience. They don't live in an international city, and they don't have many opportunities to actually use foreign languages in their daily lives. However, I hope that in English class, they will be able to think in different ways and have the opportunity to interact with each other. (Interview, 17 July 2022)

To enhance the students' learning, sharing ideas was a necessary element. However, at the beginning, Naoya confessed his worry about the students' situation: "I want to change the situation wherein the students only talk to certain people. How can I make them feel safe and involved?" (Teaching journal, May 1, 2015, in Miyazaki, 2018, p. 183).

### ***Teacher as Facilitator***

Regarding the teacher's role, Naoya stated in the interview that he would like to step back with a slightly detached perspective and become involved only when necessary. His ideal as a teacher was to provide support to his students while engaging in learner-centered activities. Accordingly, he regarded his role of supporting the students as essential so that the students would express what they really wanted to say. The students could look up vocabulary and expressions in a dictionary, but some words were too difficult, and the students could not convey their thoughts clearly. Thus, Naoya supported individual students in the following way: "I was most concerned about making sure that the students could really say exactly what they wanted to say and be as honest as possible in what they wanted to say" (Interview, 17 July 2022).

In the interview, Naoya revealed why he put emphasis on self-expression in his practice:

In my previous school, I emphasized vocabulary and grammar to equip students with the skills needed to pass the high school entrance exams. All the students consistently scored high on so-called formal tests, with very few errors. However, one day when I asked a simple question, "What do you want to do during summer vacation?" no one answered. I was shocked that these highly capable students couldn't respond. That year, I realized that my teaching approach was flawed, so I stopped using the authorized textbook. Instead, I created original teaching materials that covered vocabulary and grammar comprehensively, as used in the textbook. When I used these materials and engaged the students in activities, they underwent a remarkable transformation. They became more capable of expressing themselves freely and began to read texts more attentively. (Interview, 17 July 2022)

This experience convinced him that encouraging students to express themselves as much as possible leads to fluency. He strongly believed that fluency should come first, not accuracy.

## RQ2: How Naoya Promoted Learner Autonomy

In this section, we report on how Naoya promoted his students' autonomy in learning. First let us relate the six phases to changes in the students' behaviors and reactions (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Summary of the Six Phases

Timeline	Naoya's practice and his students' growth
Phase 1 (April–July 2015)	The teacher explores class policies and decides to place expression activities at the center of the class.
Phase 2 (August–December 2015)	Changes are observed in the students in the class.
Phase 3 (January–March 2016)	The students start enjoying cooperative activities in English.
Phase 4 (April–July 2016)	The students start to care about the audience.
Phase 5 (October–December 2016)	The students begin to enjoy their self-expression freely.
Phase 6 (January–March 2017)	The students reflect on what has influenced them and convey their thoughts to their classmates.

Across these six phases five themes were developed: two themes for RQ 1, and three for RQ 2 as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Five Themes Identified

Students as main actors	Teacher as facilitator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving students in class management</li> <li>• Having students share their work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting scaffolding activities</li> <li>• Supporting individual students</li> <li>• Observing students carefully</li> </ul>

For the students as the main actors in the class, the key themes centered on students' participation in managing the class and sharing their work with each other. For the teacher as facilitator, the three underlying themes were scaffolding, individual support, and careful observation of the students. The retrospective analysis that follows explores these five themes in more depth.

### *Involving Students in Class Management*

From the start of the two-year period, Naoya invited students to participate in class management. At the beginning of each school year, he would present his plans for the English class and ask the students for their opinions about the approach that should be implemented in the class. With the second- and third-year students, he wanted to hear from them how the previous year had gone and what they had learned. During his study, at the beginning of every unit, he would instruct the students to take a look at the textbook and see what they were interested in doing. Thereafter, they would decide on activities together. For example, in the following part of the interview, he described how he let the students decide on the activities in Phase 4:

They looked a little unsatisfied with the activities in the textbook. When I asked the students what they wanted to do, they came up with various ideas. Then, I wrote the unit plan on the blackboard and worked on it with them. **(Interview, 17 July 2022)**

In Phase 1, Naoya let the students think of an alternative activity for part of a unit. However, from Phase 2, he let the students brainstorm ideas on the activities for the whole unit. One

unit, for example, contained the activity of reading information on the website of an American school. Instead of that, the students decided to write about their ideal school, accompany it with a picture, and perform a poster presentation. In the interview, Naoya told us that for the second- and third-year students, he had them decide the criteria for how they would be assessed for every unit. The students were eager to share their ideas with the teacher; in fact, according to Naoya, “Some highly motivated students even brought ideas for activities they would like to do three or four months ahead” (Interview, 17 July 2022).

### ***Having Students Share Their Work***

In every expressive activity, the students shared their work with their peers. In Phase 1, Naoya had the students share their poems and comments with each other. The students enjoyed reading and wanted to read to their classmates, so he ended up allocating two hours for sharing. For the later phases, he put the students’ work on the wall outside of the class, thus providing opportunities for it to be read by students from other classes. He observed that, while reading works in the hallway, “Some students took notes. Others read work with their classmates and discussed the meanings or even asked the author to clarify some points” (Interview, 17 July 2022).

For some time, the students were worried about understanding the literal meaning of a text. Naoya reflected: “The students were concerned about understanding the meaning of their classmates’ work when they translated it into Japanese, so they checked the meaning of unknown words” (Interview, 17 July 2022). However, when the students shared their compositions on “My dream tool” in Phase 3, Naoya encouraged them to pay more attention to the messages the authors wished to convey, and ask their classmates questions or request more information on aspects that they were curious about. It was a memorable transition, and the students started to focus on the meanings of the messages first. In the second year, linguistic errors and accuracy were the last things the students attended to. They would begin by writing what they wanted to say freely, then they would review what they had written to see if it was accurate.

In Phase 4, the students created an original text for a textbook. The students were eager to carefully read as much of their classmates’ work as possible, so this took more time than the teacher had expected. At the end of the class, Naoya asked his students which piece of writing was the most impressive. The chosen work was “You are you. You will change. You are you. Just the way you are” (Miyazaki, 2018, p. 185). Naoya recalled during the interview that the student whose work was selected was not good at English and other subjects. However, his work was chosen because of its strong message.

In Phase 6, Naoya found that the students, as readers, had become capable of understanding what the other person was trying to convey. They wrote comments on their classmates’ work voluntarily without being instructed to do so by the teacher.

### ***Setting Scaffolding Activities***

According to Naoya, the final goal that the students aimed to achieve for each unit was often grandiose, but he did not lower it. He said, “If I had lowered the goal, judging that it is too much work for the students, it would have resulted in a piece of English writing that lacked depth” (Miyazaki, 2018, p. 187). He understood that activities for acquiring and retaining grammatical knowledge should be meaningful for his students. However, he thought that it would have been more effective if he had set other tasks, including improvised oral activities, to help the students develop the ability to express themselves

so they could write English compositions rather than spending most of the class on grammar exercises.

Naoya set several activities for his students to achieve their goals. For example, if the students wanted to create a poster and have a poster session at the end of the unit, he would first have them work in pairs to brainstorm and communicate their ideas to each other in English. Next, he had the students share ideas in English in groups of four. In each unit, he usually assigned five to six activities, such as brainstorming and sharing ideas in pairs or in groups and reading each other's drafts. He stated: "I decided the activities based on the difficulty of the final activity and the present level of the students. My main role as the teacher was to think of activities" (Interview, 17 July 2022).

## **Supporting Individual Students**

In both speaking and writing activities, Naoya spent more time supporting individual students by using a mixture of English and Japanese than giving feedback to the whole class. He often went around the students working in groups and asked individual ones what they were struggling with. He recalled:

At first, I listened to what the student wanted to say, and then I gave them several options for how they might say it. If they didn't use them, that was fine. At the beginning of the practice, they used them, but later on, they did not. (Interview, 17 July 2022)

He spent a lot of time supporting individual students who were struggling to express themselves.

The lower the grade level, the more questions I received about how to say something in English. Their questions were often ambiguous. The students didn't really know what they wanted to say, so I had to dig into what they wanted to say through a dialogue. The process of gradually translating it into English took a long time—at first, five to seven minutes per student. (Interview, 17 July 2022)

In the process, Naoya focused less on accuracy and more on appropriateness. In other words, he put more emphasis on conveying what the students intended to mean rather than having them use grammatically correct expressions. While the teacher was supporting a student, the rest of the group members would listen to the dialogue and collaboratively brainstorm to help the student. At first, many students needed the teacher's assistance, but gradually, they began to solve problems among themselves. Naoya commented:

In the end, the students seemed most convinced when they were thinking together with their peers. They came up with several possible expressions and asked their classmates which one would be best. After discussing it for a couple of minutes, they chose the best expression. (Interview, 17 July 2022)

## **Observing Students Carefully**

During his practice, Naoya would always carefully observe the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of the students' learning and performance. He utilized the observed information to assess his teaching or alter his lesson goal and plan flexibly. He established a goal and a final self-expression activity at the beginning of each unit. For example, in Phase 5, he set the goal "The students use their English knowledge and enjoy free expression without a right or wrong answer." He then began to incorporate students' opinions into the decision-making process for lesson goals and activities in the second year.

As a rule, Naoya devoted a quarter of the class to textbook activities, while the remaining time was spent on the activities developed to enhance the textbook content. He used the textbook as a resource or dictionary:

When the students express themselves, the range of expression expands in a good sense, but at the same time, the expression scatters or spreads in various directions. I used the textbooks to narrow down the range of expressions. (Interview, 17 July 2022)

As the first self-expression activity in Phase 1, Naoya introduced a poem. He had experience with a similar activity for third-year students in the past, which had been successful. Although he doubted if the activity would work for the first-year students, he noticed that the students worked hard on creating a poem. Some students anxiously brought him their first poems; he confirmed that they were fine and posted their work on the blackboard or wall. The students then started to work on the second and third poems. The students read their classmates' work enthusiastically, and their facial expressions became brighter. The students' reactions and the warm class atmosphere, based on his observations, made him confident in his practice, so he decided to place expression activities at the center of the class.

Another aspect of the way that Naoya nurtured his learners' self-expression was the emphasis he placed on fluency rather than accuracy. Although he did this from the beginning, he was still concerned about the students developing grammatical skills in the first three phases. As he observed their growth, his awareness gradually changed. In Phase 2, even students who were not good at English tried to express their ideas with the support of a dictionary and their classmates. Although the students previously had a strong sense of memorizing English, their attitudes changed to learning grammar and vocabulary in order to express themselves. In learning grammar, they began to think carefully about the context in which it was used. In addition, he noticed the following:

More students started to take notes from the blackboard or what I said. The students who only did the assigned activities (even though they had the ability to do them) were enthusiastic about the activity. They seemed to look for expressions that would better fit their feelings. They faced the language without cutting corners. (Teaching journal, December 7, 2015, in Miyazaki, 2018, p. 184)

During this phase, the students worked on the poster of their dream school. They concentrated on this activity and did not have time to work on the textbook. However, after the activity, when the students read the textbook, they understood it easily without spending too much time on it.

In Phase 3, Naoya observed that the students had changed in terms of being readers. They seemed to understand the main ideas of English texts without translating them into Japanese. Their requests for the teacher to explain in Japanese decreased, and they responded more quickly after reading texts.

In Phase 4, when the students had become more aware of the audience, they started to think more deeply about how they could convey their ideas to their classmates. While they were sharing their work, some students would ask their classmates if they understood the meaning of the text. This observation made Naoya rethink his role as a teacher and plan his class more carefully to help the students express their thoughts.

I used to think that I had to help students develop their grammatical skills, but I now think about how I can help them express what they want to express more faithfully according to their ideas. I now look more deeply at the students and try to envision the lesson in terms of whether they lack the vocabulary or the ability to structure the story. (Miyazaki, 2018, pp. 184–185)

In this phase, some students even worked on their writing of “My dream school” voluntarily, although Naoya did not give them homework. The activity of writing and sharing their work took longer than he expected, so he changed the syllabus.

In Phase 5, the students wrote a continuation of the story in the textbook “Red Demon and Blue Demon,” originally from an old Japanese tale (Hamada, 1965), set 10 years in the future. Some students wrote happy stories, while others crafted sad ones. Naoya noticed that the students reflected on themselves in their writing. The following is an example of the work:

10 years later, Red Demon couldn't play with friends. He couldn't eat well. Then he received a letter. When he saw it, he was surprised. So it was Blue Demon's letter. The message was “Don't cry. Please play with your friends. It's my last wish.” Red Demon was troubled for a long time. But one day he went out his house. He said to children “I'm home!” Children didn't understand. He get smile again. He never cry. He shouted “Thank you!” at blue sky. The he saw blue shadow, maybe. (sic) (Miyazaki, 2018, pp. 185–186)

By the time Phase 6 came around, in Naoya's view, the students, as expressive individuals, had shifted from the stage of just wanting to convey their thoughts and feelings in English to the stage of thinking and devising English statements to convey their thoughts and feelings to the reader.

## Discussion

Our interpretations suggest that Naoya views the classroom as a place where social interaction is an essential element for students' learning. In their classes, he and the students frequently interacted with each other to think, share, and co-construct meaning. This view resonates with the sociocultural perspective on language learning, wherein individual cognitive development is achieved as a result of interaction with others (Lantolf, 2000). At first, Naoya provided ample scaffolding to encourage the students to express themselves, but they gradually became more independent with the help of their peers without the need for the teacher's scaffolding. When teachers step back and allow students to use the language to express what they would like to put into words, students can experiment with the language with creative ideas (Rosenberg, 2010). This brings an element of fun into the classroom and cultivates students' ability and interest in expressing themselves creatively.

In Naoya's class, repeated creative writing activities played a key role. Tin (2013) noted that one aspect of a creative task is “the focus is on the constructing unknown meaning or ‘meaning new to self’” (p. 395), in comparison with that of a communicative task. In addition, while a communicative task promotes students' communicative desire, a creative task can enhance their creative desire. Because of this creative desire, we assume that the creative expression activities in Naoya's class encouraged students to craft their individual works in earnest, regardless of their different levels of English proficiency. Such creative expression also contributed to promoting their autonomy as communicators at the micro level. For example, in the activity of writing a poem, the students used language creatively and made linguistic choices to express what they wanted to convey in a constrained activity. The students discovered what they could do with the language rather than only learning about the language.

Through the creative expression activities, the students expressed their personal meaning beyond mere language learning, which makes a direct contribution to “autonomy as a person” at the macro level, as mentioned by Littlewood (1996). “Autonomy as a learner,” the third

type of autonomy (Littlewood, 1996), was also promoted in Naoya's class. The students were engaged in deciding on the learning goals and activities with the teacher. In other words, they were able to make choices about what and how they wanted to learn. Naoya adapted the authorized textbook audaciously to enhance students' creativity and autonomy. As a result, the students were able to take control of their learning, and their feeling of achievement in each writing activity—because of its creative nature—might have increased their intrinsic motivation.

Naoya wanted his students not only to be able to communicate their ideas but also to develop their empathetic attitude so that they would listen and be open to others. This was achieved by the end of his study. Just setting creative activities does not guarantee students' active engagement with creative thinking and sharing their work comfortably. An empathetic attitude creates a safe environment in the classroom for students to share their thoughts and work, which becomes the basis for supporting each other in the ZPD. The analysis of the data indicated that Naoya was aware of the need to create a safe space for sharing and follow a step-by-step approach to autonomy building from the beginning. Therefore, he consistently encouraged and supported students, valuing their creative thoughts. This reduced their anxiety of contributing new ideas and fear of being negatively judged by others (Henriksen et al., 2020). Vargas and Madrigal (2018) suggest that teachers should consider particular components to enhance both students' creativity and empathetic feelings and establish their connection for students' wellness in the classroom. One component is partnership. In Naoya's case, the students had connected empathetically while collaborating on various activities in pairs and groups and they also engaged in the opportunity to listen to and read classmates' ideas attentively without criticism and judgment. This developed a sense of community. Another component is time and patience. The teacher provided the students extended time in the process of generating and sharing written work. This allowed the students to explore and understand each other's ideas and learn to care for each other. In terms of acquiring English proficiency, the abundant opportunities for both output and input through sharing their ideas and written works and reading their classmates' compositions helped students recognize their potential to become competent English users. This also seemed to enhance students' motivation to engage in the various activities Naoya had established.

With regard to teacher autonomy, the findings indicate that Naoya is an autonomous teacher because he exercised his discretion in the implementation of the curriculum (Benson, 2007). This enabled him to overcome the constraints of the curriculum and the use of the textbook approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology. Through his practice, he would constantly observe the students' learning and performance across various aspects and patiently support individual students with a strong trust in their capability of learning autonomously. To provide appropriate scaffolding and alter his lesson plan and class management flexibly, he constantly reflected on and analyzed his practice, using his teaching journal for his PR. He empowered his learners by creating safe learning spaces and developing their capacity for autonomy (Lamb, 2008) by implementing activities that stimulated their creativity.

Reflecting on his two-year practice, Naoya stated in the interview that what had changed most was that the students were learning more on their own, both in and out of class. In addition, the depth of the students' relationships and comfort in being with others changed immensely.

## Conclusion

This retrospective case study has explored how a junior high school teacher enhanced learner autonomy over a two-year period of PR. Naoya's practice is exemplary in terms of his skillful way of devising tasks, paying attention to individual students, and stepping back from a teacher-centered classroom. He trusted the potential of his students' ability to express their ideas creatively while collaborating autonomously; therefore, he had a precise focus on meaning and did not compromise. The research methodology that we used enabled us to revisit his practice from a new perspective and analyze it in terms of learner autonomy. We were able to jointly understand the meaning of his practice, the process of his teaching, and learner development from a sociocultural perspective. For busy Japanese secondary school teachers, it is not an easy task to overcome the constraints imposed by English language curriculum guidelines, prescribed syllabi, and examinations, and to exercise autonomy. However, this study has shown that individual teachers can cultivate their autonomy and create an environment that promotes learner autonomy in the classroom. In Naoya's case, creativity played an important role in promoting learners' autonomy as communicators with appropriate scaffolding by the teacher, so creativity can be a key element for secondary school teachers in overcoming diverse constraints. Finally, we would like to emphasize that PR on teachers' own initiative enables them to engage in self-initiated reflection and professional development without too large a burden and can help them promote learner autonomy through trial and error. According to Naoya, maintaining a daily journal is a regular practice that lets him record his subjective observations of his teaching. He added that reflecting on his practice with the aid of journal entries, as a form of PR, allowed him to objectively assess his teaching and gain new insights for students he will instruct in the future. We hope that more school teachers will engage in PR to understand and improve their practice in terms of learner development in the classroom and beyond.

## Review Process

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

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## Appendix

### *Example Interview Questions*

What is your ideal teacher image?

What was important to you in your practice?

What did you see as your role as a teacher in the practice?

What were your thoughts on learner development during the practice?

What specific support did you provide to facilitate learner development?

What kind of feedback did you give on student expression?

What elements during the practice do you think influenced the students' change?

How do you think practitioner research has helped you support learners?