Teacher Autonomy on English Communication courses in Japanese Universities

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine university English Communication teachers' self-reports of teacher autonomy in terms of their own freedom to make decisions about the teaching and learning that occurs inside their classroom. Results showed that teacher self-perceptions of both general and curricular autonomy were high. There was some recognition that although autonomy allows teachers to adapt to student needs, standards cannot be monitored and maintained without a certain level of top-down co-ordination.

1. What is Teacher Autonomy?

Teacher autonomy has been used to mean teachers' "freedom from control by others" (McGrath 2000:101). In most cases, the 'others' would be government policy, educational authorities, and institutional or departmental managers. A variety of benefits have been linked to increased teacher autonomy, such as increased teacher motivation, reduced stress (Davis & Wilson, 2000), (Pearson & Hall, 1993), and increased empowerment and professionalism (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). In the following section, some of the studies that have attempted to measure autonomy will be briefly examined.

2. How can Autonomy be Measured?

Researchers have been trying to measure student and teacher autonomy quantitatively for decades. Charters (1974) developed the Sense of Autonomy Scale (SAS), to measure teacher autonomy. Unsatisfied with this, Chauvin and Ellett (1993) created an

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alternative scale for measuring teacher autonomy, named Attitudes of Professional Autonomy (APA). These scales were limited in their success and did nothing to prevent further alternatives from being introduced by subsequent researchers. They were attempting to overcome the naturalist argument that behaviour does not conform to laws in the way that temperature, distance, or weight do, and that it cannot be measured. However, both those who were attempting to measure autonomy, and those who thought it would never be possible agreed that "autonomy is difficult to isolate" (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006).

Pearson and Hall (1993) trialled and validated a 20-item Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS) on school teachers in the United States, which included teacher self-assessments on a range of aspects of autonomy including assessment, materials selection, and behavioural standards. They divided teacher autonomy into general autonomy and curricular autonomy, and hypothesised that perceptions of teacher autonomy among teachers would alter according to gender, age, experience, qualifications, and age-group taught. In particular, they expected that less experienced, and less qualified teachers would not perceive low autonomy as a negative condition, but that more experienced and qualified teachers would be much more likely to demand autonomy. None of the predicted correlations were found to be significant, except that Middle school teachers scored significantly higher (meaning higher self-perceived teacher autonomy) than those from Elementary or High schools.

Friedman (1999) conducted a quantitative study into Israeli teacher's ideal levels of autonomy related to 32 aspects of their working situation, such as 'Teachers decide on means and procedures of evaluating student achievement'. The investigation used a list of these aspects, for which 156 elementary school teachers rated their preferred degree of autonomy using a five-point Likert scale. The 32 items were divided into six categories: Establishing school identity and praxis, Teaching and achievement evaluation, Parental involvement, Staff development, Extracurricular subjects, and Curriculum change and development. The results showed that teachers not only desired autonomy for pedagogical aspects of their work, but also on organisational factors of the institutions they work in.

In a follow-up study published at the same time, Friedman (1999) used a slightly changed list of the desirable aspects of autonomy identified in the first study to survey 650 primary and secondary school teachers. This time, teachers were asked to declare actual (rather than desirable) levels of autonomy in their current context for the various activities. This study again used a five-point Likert scale and was given to teachers working in some schools known to have high levels of teacher autonomy, and other with low levels of teacher autonomy. For that reason, the results showed autonomy levels across the entire spectrum. Friedman found it useful to subdivide the results according to

four groupings: Principle pedagogical, Principle organizational, Routine pedagogical, and Routine organizational, depending on the institutional level, and type, of teacher autonomy.

A very useful conceptualisation of autonomy was put forward by Benson (2010) who considered student autonomy to lie between three points rather than the two points that researchers such as Nunan, (1997), and Aoki & Smith (1999) insinuate by espousing that autonomy is a matter of 'degree' (Murase, 2015:39). Benson's three points are student control, no control, and other control. If this were to be adapted to teacher autonomy, the three points might be considered teacher control, no control, and top-down coordination / collaboration. `No control` is possible if, for example, the institution does not dictate terms to the teacher and if the teacher does not have the necessary training or experience to take control of certain aspects of the language classroom such as curriculum design, pedagogy, or assessment. It stands to reason then, that 'no control' is a risk that is taken by an organisation if top-down coordination is weak, because it cannot be assumed that all teachers in an organisation have the necessary experience and motivation to take control. Benson (2010) offers the useful analogy of 'no control' being a person who is driving but not fully in control of the vehicle. The concept of 'no control' is essential when attempting to measure autonomy. If teacher autonomy and top-down coordination are considered to be two opposite ends of a two-dimensional scale, then it is possible to get a clear idea of teacher autonomy levels by measuring top-down coordination. On the other hand, if 'no control' is added, resulting in a three-point, three-dimensional scale, it then becomes necessary to measure two of the constructs in order to estimate the third. Benson (2010) makes this exact argument about the measurement of *student* autonomy.

Even though it may be useful to perceive autonomy in this three-dimensional way, so far it has not been quantitatively measured. It is clear from Benson (2010) that measuring student autonomy quantitatively is a challenge that may not eventually be achieved. However, luckily, when applying this concept to teacher autonomy, there does appear to be a way. Teachers are able to complete 'autonomy self-assessments' such as the Teacher Autonomy Scale even if, in practical terms, ESOL students might not be able to. Also, it could be hypothesised that locating the balance of teacher autonomy within this three-point scale might be possible by adding constructs to the TAS, as Pritchard and Moore (2016b) did, or in a more qualitative manner, by asking teachers whether they feel they receive enough support or have sufficient experience and training; identifying 'no control' might be as simple as identifying those teachers who give certain answers to these sorts of questions.

Lepine's (2007) analysis of possible macropolitical, state-level, district-level, and campus-level influences on teacher autonomy for elementary school teachers in the United States, identified government policy, school performance, and standardised testing, as major

influences. It was hypothesised that teachers in high-performance schools would be given more autonomy than their counterparts in low-performance schools. Pearson & Hall's (1993) Teacher Autonomy Scale was used to collect quantitative data from 25 elementary school teachers from each of two 'economically diverse' campuses, about their perceptions of teacher autonomy levels in their current contexts. The TAS results showed that involvement in standardised testing, which was true for teachers of some grades but not others, did not appear to be related to teachers' perceptions of autonomy. In general, teachers from the low-performance school perceived less autonomy than those from the high-performance school, but the results were not as stark as the researcher expected, nor is it reasonable to extrapolate these findings to the target population due to the low sample size.

Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with selected representatives from the high and low autonomy groupings identified by the TAS study. The aim was to collect qualitative data which might lead to a deeper understanding of teachers' points of view. The researcher used the TAS results to form the basis for interview topics, which focused on teachers' perceptions of their autonomy, and factors influencing it. Additionally, neither the results of the TAS, nor the actual amount of top-down (external) influence fully explained teachers' perceptions of levels of autonomy as they were described in the interviews. Also, factors such as teachers' positive or negative experiences with externally imposed programmes can dictate their future attitude to top-down coordination and their perception of levels of autonomy.

Another interesting insight occurred when the interviewer elicited descriptions of resistance or conformity to top-down controls that reduce teacher autonomy. The interviews showed that teachers in the low-performance school were more likely to actively and vocally resist externally imposed programmes than teachers in the high-performance school. It was suggested that this is because externally implemented programmes, which are more common in low-performance schools, threaten a teacher's sense of professionalism. It also became evident that some teachers may appear to agree with externally implemented programmes, but then once inside the classroom, just ignore them and teach their own content or use their own methods.

Lepine made it evident that there are several factors to be aware of in terms of damaging the generalisability and impact of a study into the measurement of teacher autonomy. The first of these is that a high number of survey non-respondents, known as 'low response rate' can be a serious limitation because it can mean that the surveyed sample is not representative of the entire target population. In this case sixty-four and forty-eight teachers were asked to take the Teacher Autonomy Scale Likert questionnaire. In each case, only 20-five agreed. In addition, Lepine (2007) found that with a sample size of just fifty respondents for the TAS, it was extremely difficult to achieve statistically

significant results. When discussing implications for future research, Lepine noted that teachers who actively engage in cooperation or 'teamwork' with other teachers may perceive this as a manifestation of, or an imposition on their autonomy. The semi-structured interviews can be used to clarify this. Finally, levels of teacher autonomy and teachers' perceptions of levels of autonomy are two entirely different constructs that may or may not correlate.

More recently, and focused on measuring *learner* autonomy, Murase (2010) produced a 113-item Likert scale called the Measuring Instrument for Language Learner Autonomy (MILLA). The questionnaire was based on an elaborate four-dimensional model of autonomy consisting of technical, psychological, political-philosophical, and social autonomy. Murase relied on 1517 first-year Japanese university English learners from 18 different universities to rate their own constantly developing sense of language learning autonomy.

While the sample size was impressive, when compared with Pearson and Hall's (1993) Teacher Autonomy Scale on which teachers rated their own freedom to make decisions, Murase's student autonomy seems much more difficult to pin down and quantify. Consequently, the data seems much more open to interpretation for several reasons. Firstly, the Teacher Autonomy Scale has a very clear 'maximum' and 'minimum' value; if a teacher does not have any autonomy in curriculum design, for example, that means that the curriculum must be dictated from above. However, learner autonomy does not have an obvious 'maximum' value and is therefore rather akin to asking 18-year-olds to evaluate how mature or grown-up they are. Murase herself acknowledges this issue: "To date, the construct of learner autonomy has been considered to be a matter of 'degree' by many researchers (Nunan, 1997; Aoki & Smith, 1999; Benson 2001). Secondly, the extent to which the respondents understand the construct they are being asked to evaluate is of vital importance. After a relatively short amount of experience, a teacher ought to know quite plainly the extent to which they are able to make their own decisions about certain aspects of their profession. However, can 1517 18-year-old Japanese students understand the concept of 'learner autonomy' enough to self-evaluate if they are not yet autonomous? It could reasonably be hypothesised that they are unlikely to be able to self-evaluate objectively. Another possible complication with this study is that in Japan, culturally, the concept of learner autonomy is somewhat alien (Dias, 2000), and Healey (1999) points out that 'learner self-direction and autonomous learning are Western concepts…(that) may not be as logical to others.'

3. Research Questions

How much general autonomy do teachers of English courses in Japanese universities perceive that they have?

How much curricular autonomy do teachers of English courses in Japanese universities perceive that they have?

4. Participants

In order to examine teacher perceptions of autonomy levels in their contexts, an online survey tool was created and used to collect data on the levels of general autonomy and curricular autonomy that teachers have. The study attempted to survey the attribute of autonomy in respondents who are representative of the target population of ESOL teachers in Japan's approximately 778 universities, of which around eighty-six are national, ninety-five are public and 590 are private (Homma 2012). This equates to approximately 11% national, 12% public, and 76% private.

The 18 respondents who completed the questionnaire were English Communication teachers in a variety of public and private universities, based in cities and in the countryside in Japan. They were known to the researcher and were contacted via email. It was hypothesised that despite the small number of respondents from each context, the data collection would yield measures of teacher autonomy that might be representative of the target population.

5. Data Collection Instrument

Pearson and Hall's (1993) statistically validated 20-item Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS) is one of the better-known measures of autonomy in the educational field. Using a 4-point Likert Scale, participants were asked to react to the statements using one of the following responses:

1 = Definitely true

2 = More or less true

3 = More or less false

4 = Definitely false

Some may consider that offering respondents a 4-point Likert Scale, rather than 5 points, interferes with genuine opinions by not providing a neutral option. However, only allowing answers to be either positive or negative does have the advantage of creating more distinct groups of responses. (Krosnick & Presser, 2010).

The 20-item survey is divided into 2 constructs. There are 12 items related to general autonomy, and 8 items related to curricular autonomy. These items were presented in

the same order as they appear in Appendix 1, which is the same order as Pearson and Hall (1993) presented them. It also includes several items which are 'doubled up' but presented in a positive and negative form. For example, 'The content and skills taught in my class are those I select' and 'In my situation, I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching'.

As Pearson & Hall's (1993) Teacher Autonomy Scale (TAS) instrument was designed for a different context, the online version of their survey used in this study begins by asking respondents to (anonymously) confirm their profession, specific employment status, and type of employer. The purpose of this was purely to confirm that respondents were all members of the target population.

6. Results

Regarding respondents' individual employment situations, all 18 respondents stated in their answers to question 1, that they work at universities in Japan. Question 2 found that 55.6% of teachers surveyed are in a 'Full-time, temporary' contractual situation, whereas 44.4% are 'Permanent'. A variety of job titles were elicited in question 3 'What is your current position?': 5 are lecturers, 5 are assistant professors with one of these on a non-permanent contract, 5 are associate professors, and 2 are professors. One respondent did not submit a job title.

Focusing on the 12 items related to the construct of general autonomy, 17 out of 18 respondents, think it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that they are free to be creative in their teaching approach. 17 teachers also said that it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that the selection of student-learning activities in their class is under their control. 12 out of 18 respondents think it is 'definitely false' or 'more or less false' that their teaching primarily follows approaches that are specified by the school. 17 respondents think it is 'definitely false' or 'more or less false' that they seldom use alternative procedures in their teaching. 16 out of 18 respondents think it is 'definitely false' or 'more or less false' that their instructional planning is dictated by district needs. All respondents think it is 'definitely false' or 'more or less false' that their jobs do not allow for much discretion by the teacher. 15 respondents think that it is 'definitely true' that they have control of scheduling in the classroom. Nine of the teachers answered that it is 'more or less false' that they have limited latitude in how major problems are resolved, while other responses were quite equally distributed between the other three options. 17 respondents perceive themselves to have control over how classroom space is used, and the remaining teacher did not respond. 14 teachers disagreed that evaluation and assessment activities used in their classes are decided by other people, but four agreed. 16 teachers said that it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that they select the teaching methods and strategies used with their students. 16 teachers responded

that it is 'definitely false', and two responded that it is 'more or less false' that they have little say over the scheduling of use of time in their class.

Moving on to focus on the eight items related to curricular autonomy, 16 of the 18 respondents said that it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that what they teach in their class is determined for the most part by themselves, and that the content and skills taught are those they select by themselves. An even more convincing 17 out of 18 respondents replied that their teaching focuses on those goals and objectives that they select themselves. 15 out of 18 respondents said that it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that the materials used in their classes are chosen for the most part by themselves. Once again, 17 out of 18 said that it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that in their teaching they use their own guidelines and procedures. 15 out of 18 think it is 'definitely false' or 'more or less false' that in their situation they have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching. 100% of teachers said that it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that standards for their classes are set primarily by themselves. Finally, 16 out of 18 think it is 'definitely true' or 'more or less true' that they follow their own dictates as to when and how topics are taught.

At the end of the online TAS, which was true to the original except for the additional items examining profession, specific employment status, and type of employer, one extra section was added entitled 'Please add any other comments if you feel you would like to'. This yielded some more descriptive insights into the contexts of individual teachers. The most insightful comments related to creativity and the regulation of courses were 'I'm in a good teaching situation here and I appreciate it', 'there is some leeway if I prefer to teach a more active class even when the objective is receptive.', 'it often depends on the class, what dept. the class is under and who the coordinator is, some are very strict and tight with their recommendations, others allow a lot more flexibility'.

The most interesting insights into curricular management were 'I am a single vote among several staff and sometimes feel the content does not match my interest or approaches', 'Although I appreciate the freedom given to me by the school in planning many aspects of the syllabus, I also think that a more coordinated program would bring more credibility to the department and offer all students equal learning opportunities, regardless of the teacher'.

7. Discussion & Conclusions

The small number of respondents means that the results are not necessarily representative of the target population of English Communication teachers in Japanese universities. The insights into these contexts are not necessarily transferable to other

contexts within Japan. However, the conclusions drawn from this research might serve as the justification for further investigation.

Firstly, regarding the research question 'How much general autonomy do teachers of English courses in Japanese universities perceive that they have?', it is clear from the responses that most teachers perceive themselves as free to be creative, to select activities, select teaching methods and strategies, to control the use of classroom space, have some discretion, and to control scheduling for their own classes. Most teachers do not perceive that they seldom use alternative procedures, have limited latitude in dealing with problems, evaluation and assessment activities are decided by other people, teaching approaches are specified by the school and instructional planning is dictated by district needs. All of these results support the conclusion that the majority of teachers enjoy quite a high level of general autonomy, regardless of position or contractual situation. There are exceptions to this majority, however, and these will be examined in the discussion of the additional comments section.

Secondly, with reference to the research question 'How much curricular autonomy do teachers of English courses in Japanese universities perceive that they have?', most teachers perceive that what they teach in their class, when and how topics are taught, the content and skills taught, the materials, the standards, the guidelines and procedures, and goals and objectives are determined by themselves. All of these results support the conclusion that the majority of teachers enjoy quite a high level of curricular autonomy, regardless of position or contractual situation.

Finally, concerning the additional comments, these might be interpreted in different ways by different researchers. For example, 'there is some leeway' gives the impression that the teacher is free to do what they want, within limits. This might mean so long as there are no complaints by students, or there might be pre-existing faculty guidelines. This could then possibly be explained by the comment 'some coordinators are very strict and tight with their recommendations, others allow a lot more flexibility', although this was made by a different teacher. One pattern that does seem to emerge from all of the results and comments, is that of variety. It seems that teachers enjoy a high level of autonomy and that there is little in terms of standardisation of curriculum, assessment, materials, within or between universities, faculties, departments, and courses. The comment 'I am a single vote among several staff and sometimes feel the content does not match my interest or approaches' shows that this individual department or faculty (several staff) selects its own curricular content by voting; meaning that it is probably not standardised within the university, nor year after year. This sort of departmental or faculty autonomy has implications for accountability and for consistency in learning outcomes, as demonstrated by the comment 'Although I appreciate the freedom given to me by the school in planning many aspects of the syllabus, I also think that a more

coordinated program would bring more credibility to the department and offer all students equal learning opportunities, regardless of the teacher'. Again, this comment was made by a different teacher to the previous one, perhaps establishing that disconnected curricula is common practice in more than one context.

Despite the many benefits of teacher autonomy shown by existing research, such as increased teacher motivation and reduced stress, there can be negative implications. For high teacher autonomy to be a successful policy in terms of ensuring that students are receiving quality language instruction, it requires independent, motivated, and experienced teachers. However, high levels of teacher autonomy also imply that monitoring of standards, in terms of teaching, curriculum, assessment, and learning outcomes are not common practice. This is symptomatic of the higher-level issue of the preference in Japanese society for the use of standardised English tests such as TOEIC to judge English proficiency. Such practices have perhaps led to the lack of accountability in Japanese higher education and might therefore explain the high level of teacher autonomy on university English Communication courses.

<u>Appendix 1:</u> Pearson and Hall's (1993) statistically validated 20-item Teacher Autonomy Scale

General Autonomy	Likert Scale:
I am free to be creative in my teaching approach.	1 2 3 4
The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control.	1 2 3 4
My teaching primarily follows approaches that are specified by the school.	1 2 3 4
I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching.	1 2 3 4
My instructional planning is dictated by district needs.	1 2 3 4
My job does not allow for much discretion on my part.	1 2 3 4
The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control.	1 2 3 4
In my situation, I have only limited latitude in how major problems are resolved.	1 2 3 4
In my class, I have little control over how classroom space is used.	1 2 3 4
The evaluation and assessment activities used in my class are selected by people other than myself.	1 2 3 4
I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students.	1 2 3 4
I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom.	1 2 3 4
Curriculum Autonomy	

What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself.	1 2 3 4
The content and skills taught in my class are those I select.	1 2 3 4
My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself.	1 2 3 4
The materials I use in my class are chosen for the most part by myself.	1 2 3 4
In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures.	1 2 3 4
In my situation, I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching.	1 2 3 4
Standards for my classroom are set primarily by myself.	1 2 3 4
I follow my own dictates as to when and how topics are taught.	1 2 3 4

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