

2008

# Japanese students' autonomy in learning English as a foreign language in out-of-school settings

Kimiyoshi Inomata

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The University of San Francisco

JAPANESE STUDENTS' AUTONOMY IN LEARNING  
ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL SETTINGS

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Kimiyoishi Inomata

San Francisco

May, 2008

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: THE RESEACH PROBLEM .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose of the Study .....	6
Research Questions.....	6
Theoretical Rationale.....	7
Significance of Study.....	9
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	11
Introduction: The Three Approaches to Autonomous Language Learning.....	11
Autonomy as the Technical Ability .....	13
Language Learning Strategies (LLS).....	13
Japanese Students' Language Learning Strategies for English as a Foreign Language.....	15
Autonomy as the Internal Psychological Capacity .....	19
Zone of Proximal Development and Autonomy .....	20
Cooperative Learning and EFL Students' Psychological Struggles in Japanese Contexts .....	21
The Political Version of Autonomy.....	25
Social Background of Autonomy.....	26
Japanese EFL Contexts .....	28
Summary and Discussion.....	34
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .....	38
Research Design .....	38
Research Site and Participants.....	40
Data Collection and Analysis .....	41
The Background of the Researcher.....	45
My Role as the Researcher and a Tutor.....	46
Protection of Human Subjects .....	48
CHAPTER IV: THE LEARNERS AND THEIR LEARNING CONTEXTS .....	49
Introduction.....	49
Akira and his Learning Context.....	49
Miki and her Learning Context.....	52
Hiro and his Learning Context.....	55
Conclusion .....	57

CHAPTER V: EFL ACTIVITIES IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL SETTINGS .....	58
Introduction.....	58
Akira Emphasized Explicit Techniques.....	59
Miki Emphasized Routine Memorization.....	67
Hiro Emphasized Understanding Meaning.....	72
Conclusion .....	77
CHAPTER VI: SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED EFL LEARNING AND AUTONOMY. 81	
Introduction.....	81
English as a Neutral Object .....	82
The Academic Values with Other Ideological Attributes.....	93
Desires, Awareness, and Reality in EFL Contexts .....	102
Conclusion .....	116
CHAPTER VII: RECONSTRUCTING AUTONOMY IN JAPANESE SOCIAL CONTEXTS.....	118
Introduction.....	118
The School-Based Discourse Community and Autonomy .....	118
Schooled Society and Autonomy.....	126
“International Society” and Autonomy.....	132
Conclusion .....	135
Implication for Educators, Researchers, and Policy Makers .....	136
REFERENCES .....	140

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without insightful advice, patience, and flexibility provided by my supervisor, Dr. Susan Roberta Katz. In fact, her class “Cross-cultural Literacy” inspired me to direct my dissertation. I feel fortunate and honored to have her as my supervisor. I am also very appreciative of thought-provoking feedback for my dissertation given by a wonderful dissertation committee: Dr. Shabnam Koirala-Azad, Dr. Noah Borrero, and Dr. Jabari Mahiri.

I also want to deeply express my gratitude for my parents, Kimihiro Inomata and Haruyo Inomata, for their constant support for everything. I cannot emphasize more that their faith in my autonomy has been the best encouragement for me to overcome difficulties in learning in foreign environments. *Itsumo ouenshite kurete hountouni arigatougozaimasu.*

I would like to express my special thanks to my friends who constantly encouraged me as well. I am most indebted to Larry Fields, my best friend, who patiently checked my writing and provided me with thoughtful comments. I thank Yoko Koki for encouraging and inspiring me as my friend and classmate. I surely will miss the moments that we study together both in-and out-of-school. I appreciate Michiko Kojima who also supported my dissertation. Without her advice and support, this research could not have been realized in the first place.

Finally, my deep thanks go to my informants. They were very cooperative and willing to share personal experiences and private thoughts with me. I could not appreciate more about this aspect, knowing that many Japanese people would hesitate to share their private lives with someone who is not an acquaintance.

## CHAPTER I

### THE RESEACH PROBLEM

#### Introduction

In recent decades, non-native speakers all over the world have been impelled to learn English to gain advantages, both in their own societies and global settings, due to the fact that English has become the dominant medium for world communication. The language plays a vital role in academic, economic, and political spheres. For example, more than 50% of the academic papers published each year are written in English (Swales, 1987), and over 90% of web pages are written in English (Brown, 2002).

Although often cited as a homogenous society, Japan also faces this global trend. For example, the Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a consultative body convened by Prime Minister *Obuchi*, submitted a proposal to make English the second official language in 2001. The commission claimed that Japanese citizens need to acquire "global literacy" skills to fully enjoy a better life in the world of the twenty-first century. These new literacy skills involve the mastery of information technology tools and English as the international *lingua franca* (Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2000). Although the proposal was not implemented due to public resistance, such a political move clearly indicated the powerful influence of the English language on Japanese society.

In contrast to the growing demand for English as a communicative tool, English education in Japan appears to fail to meet the demand. Instead, it has emphasized grammatical structure, teacher-oriented classrooms and standardized exams (Hart, 2002; Torikai, 2000; Usuki, 2002). The public has expressed dissatisfaction with English

education, complaining mainly of inefficiency in education for improving authentic English skills (Irie, 2004; Matsuzaka, Fujieda & Mahoney, 2004; Torikai, 2000).

Other Asian countries also have serious problems in English education. Policy makers and teachers across Asian Pacific countries frankly admit that the quality of education in the public sector is so low that no one learns English in school (Nunan, 2002). Since English proficiency can play a crucial role to be successful in both a global and domestic society, failure to provide adequate education may reproduce inequalities in society, limiting access to tremendous amounts of information in English as well as certain job positions which demand a good command of English.

Under these circumstances, the concept of “autonomy” has attracted attention as an alternative approach to language learning (Benson, 1997, 2001; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1996). “The capacity to take control of one’s learning” defines autonomy (Benson, 1997, p.25). According to Benson and Voller (1997), the significance of the concept of autonomy in language learning has emerged under the circumstances that far more language education is taking place, in more varied situations, and for a wider variety of purposes than ever before, while the traditional teaching style has had difficulty catching up with these new complexities. Although there are different perspectives in the field of autonomy, many agree that autonomy plays the most important role in acquiring authentic language (Benson, 2001).

Traditional school systems have been criticized for emphasizing information and skills disconnected from students’ real lives, which can discourage some from learning at school (Freire, 1970; Gee, 2004; Illich, 1970; Moll, 2003; Skilton-Sylvester 2002). These claims also apply to current English education in Japan: The content of English education have often been criticized for being irrelevant to authentic English in the real world



(Takanashi & Takahashi, 2007; Torikai, 2000) and a considerable number of junior high and high school students confessed that they dislike studying English (Takanashi & Takahashi, 2007)

Fostering students' autonomy, such as helping students to identify goals and employ effective strategies to achieve these goals, and raise awareness of social contexts, has strong potential as an alternative approach to language learning. In fact, autonomy has been effectively fostered through cooperative learning in the classroom (Hart, 2002; Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 1996), creating self-access facilities (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Little, 1996; Littlewood, 1996), as well as giving instruction of language learning strategies (Nakanishi, 2002; O' Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo & Kupper, 1985; Ryan, 1997). All of these studies show positive results that learners successfully improved language proficiency, self confidence, and motivation.

In order to develop effective environments to facilitate autonomy, we first need to carefully examine learners' needs, educational background and culture (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Jones, 1995; Pennycook, 1991). However, in Japan, both research and English education are still heavily focused on how to teach English (Torikai, 2000; Usuki, 2002), and little attention has been given to examining students' autonomy (Robbins, 1996; Usuki, 2002). Especially, few empirical studies reported how Japanese EFL students negotiate their autonomy in relation to social contexts. This dissertation seeks to understand Japanese high school students' autonomy in EFL learning by conducting a qualitative study on their learning experience and social contexts. Based on findings, I discuss how autonomy should take place in Japanese EFL contexts as well as the nature of autonomy in relation to social contexts.

## Statement of the Problem

The concept of autonomy has a complex construction (Benson, 2002), making it intricate to separate one element of autonomy from another. However, earlier studies in autonomous language learning overlooked the holistic view of autonomy, approaching autonomy from one particular angle. The segmented versions of autonomy may lead us away from the whole map, which crosses technical, cognitive, and social domains. For example, an approach to autonomy as skills, or as psychological capacities, tend to failed to provide valid implications for language learning, disregarding social constraints of autonomy (Benson, 1997). Street (1984, 1994) insisted that research needs to seek the dynamic aspects of language learning process embedded in social contexts. Consequently, this dissertation examines English learners' contexts, and the ways in which learners exercise autonomy, perceive of language learning, and seek to understand how these elements interact to build the complex construction of autonomy.

Second, the majority of previous studies on autonomy in language learning have based their conclusions within the framework of existing educational systems. These studies likely overlooked the autonomy which learners gained in social contexts in out-of-school settings. These studies demonstrated that fostering autonomy in the classrooms through collaborative learning and teaching specific language learning strategies have been trends.

While these studies reported positive results in language learning, they did not adequately address the learners' own pre-established autonomy, and how guided autonomy by these studies could make sense in the learners' own contexts in out-of-school settings. Without considering learners' social contexts and the ways in which they

exercise autonomy within the contexts, encouraging autonomy in the classroom is always at risk to have short-term effects which only can be seen in-school settings.

Littlewood (1999) also proposed the necessity to “match the different aspects of autonomy with the characteristics and needs of learners in specific contexts” (p. 1). Moreover, I was concerned about the assumption that learners do not have autonomy and thus, that it should be fostered. Penneycook (1997) foresaw that the potential for cultural imperialism in fostering learners’ autonomy without knowing the learners’ culture. The classroom provides too narrow a sample to examine students’ social contexts to overcome such a risk. In order to explore broader social contexts of EFL learning, this dissertation collected data in out-of-school settings, which few previous studies have closely examined.

Moreover, Pennycook (1997) claimed that discovering students’ voices is critical in exploring their culture in autonomy. However, Japanese students’ authentic behavior and voices to English learning were not adequately highlighted in previous literature (Usuki, 2002). Thus, this dissertation provides rich data on the Japanese students’ voices to illuminate how the students made sense of autonomy in their own contexts.

Finally, few empirical studies verified the appropriateness of applying autonomy, the capacity to take control over one’s learning (Benson, 1997, p. 25) in Japanese EFL contexts. Citing the fact that the concept of autonomy was derived from Western society, some studies pointed out that certain Asian cultures validated the authority of the teacher. Thus, fostering autonomy would not be appropriate, and might even cause resistance from teachers and students to such pedagogical shifts (see Ho and Crookall, 1995; Jones 1995).

Aoki and Smith (1999) also suggested that Japanese teachers may show a similar resistance toward autonomy. However, Aoki and Smith argued that the important issue is “not whether autonomy itself is appropriate, but how a negotiated version of autonomy can be best enabled in all contexts” (p. 3). Because few empirical studies provided the data for the “contexts” for autonomy in language learning in Japan, it was still ambiguous how autonomy could take place in Japanese environments. Therefore, by providing the data which projects the Japanese students’ EFL contexts, this dissertation discusses whether the concept of autonomy would make sense in a Japanese EFL environment, and if so, how the concept should be negotiated with Japanese contexts.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to explore Japanese students’ autonomy in EFL learning in out-of-school settings with an emphasis on social contexts. Through qualitative study of three Japanese high school students, I attempt to provide thick data which describe EFL activities of the three informants in out-of-school settings, and project their social contexts.

#### Research Questions

This dissertation addresses four questions:

1. What are the ways in which the Japanese high school students exercise their capacity to take control of EFL learning in out-of-school settings?
2. What are the characteristics of the social contexts for EFL learning in out-of-school settings, including norms, values, expectations, and power relations?
3. How do the social contexts interact with the students’ capacity to take control of their EFL learning in out-of-school settings?

## Theoretical Rationale

The concept of autonomy is “a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times” (Benson, 2001, p. 47). Such complex features of autonomy have led scholars to have different perspectives on autonomous language learning (Benson, 1997, 2002; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Little, 1991, Littlewood, 1990). In this dissertation, I use Benson’s (1997) definition of autonomy: “capacity to take control of one’s learning” (p. 25). This definition is simple, yet covers the multidimensional characteristics of autonomy (Benson, 2001).

Littlewood (1996) identified two elements in autonomy: ability and willingness. The former was further divided into two elements: knowledge and skill. The latter was also divided into two elements: motivation and willingness. Although the present study approaches autonomy without dividing its elements to understand a holistic nature of autonomy, it should be noted that autonomy does not always take a form of directly observable action as the categories show. Thus, this dissertation seeks to understand not only action, but also potentiality for autonomy in EFL learning, such as motivation and willingness.

Littlewood (1999) proposed another significant category of autonomy in language learning. He identified two types of autonomy; proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy can be found when learners are fully involved in the process of learning, including determining objectives, selecting methods, techniques, and conducting evaluations. In contrast, reactive autonomy does not create its own directions, but once a direction has been initiated, it enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal. Reactive autonomy can be a primary step to

proactive autonomy, or it can make a goal on its own. Examining the East Asian context, Littlewood (1999) suggested that reactive autonomy was likely to be active in East Asian contexts which people preferred to working as a group. This reactive autonomy provides a conceptual framework to understand Japanese students' autonomy in EFL learning, considering that such group-oriented attitudes in individuals were often seen among Japanese people (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

In fact, while autonomy had been widely discussed as an individual matter, the current studies proposed social aspects of autonomy. For example, Little (1996) pointed out that autonomy was a product of interdependence in a society. Using Vygotsky's framework, he found that learners' autonomy could be effectively fostered through cooperative work with peers. Kohonen (1992) also claimed that autonomy implied interdependence:

Personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions, and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways. (p. 19)

Considering that autonomy takes different forms in different cultures (Aoki and Smith, 1999; Littlewood, 1999), Little and Kohonen's claims are significant because they expanded the scope of autonomy, providing lens to examine autonomy in cultures which do not emphasize individualism.

Benson (2001) further expanded autonomy in language learning to political spheres, forcefully arguing that autonomy is achievable only when learners are conscious about political realities and gain the right to take control over content of learning. To understand the complexity of autonomy, research needs to critically examine the content of language

learning in relation to the social contexts (Benson, 1997, 2001). Benson's claim is based on critical theory which focuses on power issues, shedding light on how inequality and marginalization take place in social contexts (Benson, 1997, 2001; Patton, 1990).

Benson (2001) proposed that "we need a considerably expanded notion of the political which would embrace issues such as the societal context in which learning takes place, role and relationships in the classroom and outside, kinds of learning tasks, and the content of the language that is learned" (p. 32). He further stated that all second language learners unavoidably engage in power issues in everyday language learning processes, providing two examples of the political issues regarding English learning: First, the decision to make English a compulsory subject in education implies an elimination of the importance of other languages. Second, learners often encounter social and economic inequalities within or between communities, particularly when gaining access to the benefits from membership of the target-language community in multilingual societies, migrant education and global business. While the majority of studies on autonomy have been conducted within the educational system, Benson's claim provides a framework to critically examine assumptions underlying in Japanese society and education. Thus, the present study will support this claim and critically examine how social contexts interact with individuals' autonomy.

### Significance of Study

The topic of autonomy in language learning is relatively new (Benson, 1997), and few studies have examined Japanese students' autonomy (Usuki, 2002). This dissertation may also bring new insights into the field of study, providing descriptive data of Japanese students' EFL activities in out-of-school settings and its social contexts, which can rarely

be found in the previous studies. The results of my study may raise new questions and provide insights into both the characteristics of Japanese learners' autonomy and a nature of autonomy.

Also, my study may provide English teachers with resources to reflect on their own teaching because it shows teaching influences or school impacts on students' EFL learning in out-of-school settings. Finally, I hope to draw useful implications for the effective ways to encourage learners to expand their capacities to take control of EFL learning, considering their EFL contexts.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction: The Three Approaches to Autonomous Language Learning

In second language education, autonomy —the capacity to control one’s own learning —has been considered to be a key element in successful language learning (Benson, 1997, 2002; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Little, 1991, Littlewood, 1996). While the concept has stimulated many empirical studies, the definition of “autonomy” remains ambiguous and differs among scholars because of its complex construction (Benson, 1997, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997; Holec, 1981; Little, 1996). In the following paragraphs, I provide three major definitions which represent different perspectives on autonomy.

Holec (1981) defined autonomy as “the ability of take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3), which has been one of the earliest and most frequently cited definitions (Benson, 1997).The definition owed much to the work on adult education that the Council of Europe promoted in the 1970’s (Little, 1996). Holec further elaborated the concept of autonomy as: “determining the objectives; defining the content and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been acquired” (p.3). The cognitive skills of autonomy were emphasized in the definition (Benson, 2001).

In addition to the cognitive emphasis, Little (1991, p. 4) highlighted the developmental psychological dimensions by describing autonomy as:

a capacity- for detachment, critical refection, decision-making, and independent

action. It presupposes, but also entails that learners will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (p. 4).

Little's (1991) definition was significant because it expanded the concept of autonomy from cognitive skills to psychological capacities interacting with social contexts. Benson (2001) pointed out that both Holec (1981) and Little's (1991) definitions lacked one vital element of autonomous language learning: control over the content of learning, which has situational aspects. Benson argues the social constraints on autonomy should be critically examined, because individuals would be able to adequately practice their autonomy only when they gained capacity to control their learning content embedded in their environments. As a comprehensive and simple definition, Benson (1997) proposed that autonomy is "the capacity to take control of one's learning" (p. 25). Throughout this paper, I will use this definition for the term "autonomy."

Benson (1997, p. 25) categorizes dominant approaches to autonomous language learning into three approaches. Each approach distinguishes autonomy as:

1. the act of learning on one's own and the technical ability to do so
2. the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning
3. control over the content and process of one's own learning

Although these three approaches are interdependent (Benson, 1997, 2001), they are useful guidelines in this study to review the general approaches to autonomy as well as articulate the perspective of the present study. According to the three approaches, I review the main concepts and empirical studies in each approach, with special reference to the relevant empirical studies on Japanese EFL students' autonomy. Through

examining the research, I highlight discrepancies among the literature and what remains unknown in the field of autonomy. Finally, I discuss how this dissertation seeks a way to fill the gaps in the literature.

### Autonomy as the Technical Ability

According to Benson (1997), the first approach to autonomous learning is based on positivist assumptions: knowledge exists objectively and learning takes place in the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another. Based on the assumptions, one can acquire autonomy through mastering techniques and skills. Consequently, the main issue of this approach has become how to equip learners with such techniques and skills. With this approach, autonomy is often seen as “the act of learning on one’s own and the technical ability to do so” (p. 25). This perspective on autonomy is found particularly in the research on Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and the learner’s training. Among the studies, LLS is the most widespread topic in the field of second language acquisition.

### Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

The field of research on Language Learning Strategies (LLS) originated from cognitive psychology (O’Malley et. al, 1985; Oxford, 1990). According to Takeuchi (2002), the first systematic empirical study on language learning strategy was conducted by Rubin (1975). He observed ESL classes and interviewed ESL students both in Hawaii and California to describe the learning methods of good language learners, finding that they actively used a variety of learning strategies.

Rubin (1975) found that successful language learners had a wider variety of learning strategies, and more flexibility in using the strategies according to learning tasks and contexts than unsuccessful learners. He claimed that instructing learners with the actual

strategies used by successful learners should increase target language proficiency for all learners. Rubin's (1975) claim has stimulated studies on language learning strategies (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Kupper, 1985; Takeuchi, 2002) Among them, the most comprehensive and influential study was conducted by Oxford (Takeuchi, 2002).

Oxford (1990) defined learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). To assess learning strategies of soldiers at Defense Language Institute, Oxford (1990) developed an instrument named Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is now the most often used strategy scale worldwide (Benson, 2001; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Takeuchi, 2002).

In SILL, Oxford (1990) first categorized strategies into two: the direct strategies and indirect strategies, which either directly or indirectly affect the target language learning. As for the former strategies, the three types of language strategies were identified: Memory strategies such as grouping or using imagery, which help learners store and retrieve new information; cognitive strategies, such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, which enable learners to understand and produce new language; and compensation strategies, which allow learners to use the language despite their gaps in knowledge, such as guessing or using synonyms.

Indirect strategies were also divided into three subcategories: Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition by using functions such as arranging, planning and evaluation; affective strategies help to regulate emotions, including using music, making positive statements and rewarding oneself; and social strategies help to learn through interaction with others, such as asking questions and

cooperating with peers.

#### Japanese Students' Language Learning Strategies for English as a Foreign Language

Results of SILL in some studies showed that Japanese EFL students frequently used strategies to enhance memories. For example, "I say or write new English words several times" in item 10 was reported as one of the most frequently used language learning strategies (see Kikuchi, 2004; Robson & Midorikawa, 2001; Takeuchi, 2002). Takeuchi (2002) and Yamamori et al. (2003) deduced that the result was likely the consequence of Japanese English education which required memorization of vocabulary and grammar.

While the use of the strategy for memorization was relatively high, Yamamori et al. (2003) found that statistically significant differences in the rate of strategy use between the high-achievement and low-achievement groups. Yamamori et al. (2003) described transitions over time in the learning strategies used by seventh-grade students in relation to English achievement. They administered a certain part of the SILL and achievement test to 88 junior high school students three times separately over the course of a semester. In the results, the high achievement group used more strategy which enhanced memory by writing repeatedly than the low achievement group.

Through interviews with the students, Takeuchi (2002) found that the quality of enhancing memory strategies was also quite different between high achievement and low achievement groups. Takeuchi examined the learning strategies of 153 female college students who majored in English to identify the strategies of successful learners. In addition to SILL, informants were administered English testing and wrote descriptions of their personal English language learning strategies. Takeuchi reported that upper-level

students who scored high on the test tended to memorize sentences in depth, especially in their early phases of learning. Moreover, the upper-level students had a variety of methods of memorization:

“I said repeatedly the model sentences, changing some of their parts. If I kept practicing it until I could say it smoothly, then the sentences just pop out automatically. It’s fun.”

“In school, I was forced to memorize more than 1,000 model sentences. After that, I was able to identify which was a correct sentence and which was not. I have used these model sentences as my resources for speaking and writing.”

“I memorized model sentences and expressions which are often used in daily life. Not only did I say them repeatedly, but I also wrote them countless times. Even now I still remember those sentences” (p. 33)

(translated from Japanese by the author)

The comments revealed that the students did not merely memorize English words, but also expanded their strategies to other activities such as reading and speaking. In contrast, lower-level students’ comments were considerably shorter and their strategies were more rudimentary than those of upper-level students. One example was simply listing vocabulary words in order to try to memorize all the words. One student’s comment reflected this style: “I wrote out all the words which I didn’t know, made a list of those words, and then, memorized all the words” (Takeuchi, 2002, p. 33).

Takeuchi (2002) also found that SILL overlooked some learning strategies which were unique to Japanese students: They were actively using “model sentences” in learning English. The model sentence contains certain types of grammatical structures or

phrases and it appears in textbooks for explaining grammar and usage. Instead of memorizing words and phrases, some Japanese students memorized the model sentences by writing and speaking, and applied the sentences to their writing and speaking.

As Yamamori et al. (2003) and Takeuchi (2002) studies showed, the quality and frequency of utilizing strategies to enhance memories seemed to be connected to English achievement in Japanese EFL learning environments: The more English proficiency improved, the more frequently and more complex strategies learners tend to use to memorize English. However, further studies would be needed to support the claim.

Other language learning strategies were also reported to have a relationship with English achievement as well. Kikuchi's (2004) informants were 208 students who studied at a university with a high reputation for language education. Since all the students passed the college entrance exam that required high English proficiency, Kikuchi considered her informants as high achievers of English. She compared the overall scores of SILL to other two studies (Kimura, 1995; Watanuki, 2004, as cited in Kikuchi, 2004), which gave SILL to students who attended average-level universities in English education. Kikuchi found that her informants put higher priority on using social strategies than did other university students. Social strategies included "I try to learn about the culture of English speakers," and "I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk."

Kikuchi (2004) deduced that high English proficiency was more likely to allow students to apply their English abilities to authentic contexts. In contrast, the other studies (Robson & Midorikawa, 2001; Takeuchi, 2002; Yamamori et al, 2003) indicated that social strategies were less popular among Japanese students, including the high achievers among junior high school students (Yamamori et al, 2003) . Yamamori et al. stated that it was quite natural that social strategies were least used because the students had studied

English for only a year and few resources were available for them other than classroom activities.

While SILL provided insightful information on the characteristics of the ways in which Japanese students exercise EFL learning, the scope of the questionnaire was too narrow to specifically discuss how learning environments can promote or constrain the language learning strategies. Miyazaki (2003) criticized that the outcome from SILL cannot tell us about learning contexts which have a deep impact on language learning strategies. Benson (1997) also criticized that the approach which treated autonomy as mere technical abilities had overlooked social impact on learning.

Examining general learning strategies, Nola (1995) also found that Japanese learners tended to emphasize memorization strategies. She examined and compared the learning strategies of three groups; Australian high school students in Australia (122 males and 126 females), Japanese high school students in Japan (98 male and 117 females), and Japanese students in Australia (10 males and 20 females). The author analyzed twenty-four types of learning strategies by employing questionnaires and conducting interviews with both the Japanese and Australian students.

After analyzing the data, a significant difference in the strategy of rehearsing and memorizing was identified among the three groups. Japanese students in Japan were most likely to use rehearsing and memorizing strategies, while Australian students were less likely to use them. The result also showed that Japanese students in Australia tended to retain their rehearsal and memorizing strategies even after they moved to Australia. His claim supported a deduction of Takeuchi (2002) and Yamamori et al. (2003) that education may strongly influence on the Japanese students' learning strategies.

Although these studies mentioned the influence of learning contexts, mainly



education, their studies did not provide evidence nor valid explanation to support such claims. The impact of contexts on language learning has been reported by recent studies. For instance, in the Japanese environment, Kimura (2002) reported that Japanese EFL students and Japanese returnees from abroad tended to use different types of LLS: While EFL students tended to use methods which directly related to language skills, the returnees were more likely to create social situations in English. Besides LLS, learners showed different approaches to language learning in EFL and ESL contexts, such as pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Schauer, 2006), and acquisition of oral fluency (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). These studies suggest that social contexts have a deep impact on language learning, as well as autonomy in language learning.

However, how social contexts interacted with autonomy largely remained unknown from the first approach to autonomy. It was claimed that the success of application of autonomy for real situations largely depended on careful examination of learner's social contexts (Cremmo & Riley, 1995; Littlewood, 1996). To make the findings from the first approach more valuable, research would need to deeply examine social contexts beyond learning skills and techniques.

#### Autonomy as the Internal Psychological Capacity

The second approach presented by Benson (1997) considers autonomy as “the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning” (p.25). While the first approach was based on a positivist paradigm, the second approach is likely supported by constructivists who assume that knowledge is constructed through social interaction (Benson, 1997). In this section, I introduce the relevant concepts to the second approach. Then, I review empirical studies in Japanese contexts, illuminating the characteristics of

Japanese learners and the second approach.

### Zone of Proximal Development and Autonomy

Like the positivist studies, the assumptions of constructivists were often incorporated into the discipline of psychology. As for the influential concepts to autonomy derived from a psychological study, Barns (1976) distinguished two kinds of knowledge: school knowledge and action knowledge. The first knowledge was presented and held in a decontextualized form. School knowledge may enable us to answer the teacher's questions or to solve problems on exams, but the knowledge will remain unfamiliar and easily forgotten. The second -action knowledge- formed the basis of learners' view of the world and life, leading learners to action. This type of knowledge cannot be obtained through transmission from teachers to students, but only through the learners' active involvement in learning.

Little (1996) claimed that action knowledge should play a central role in any theories of learner autonomy because "after all, the outcome of developmental learning is autonomy, in the sense that it (action knowledge) enables the child to operate independently across a range of domestic and social contexts" (p.5). To overcome the problem of schooling, Little stated that institutions need to design a class which encourages autonomy through enhancing active knowledge. Using Vygotsky's (1978) framework, Little further elaborated his claim that language learners need assistance from more experienced persons to effectively gain action knowledge.

Vygotsky (1978) stated that a variety of internal developmental process function only when the child is interacting with people and peer in his environments. Vygotsky further articulated how learning takes place in the interaction by introducing the notion of "zone

of proximal development” (ZPD):

.. the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determinate through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.  
(p.86)

The above notion of ZPD suggests how we can arrange the environment which assists learners to progress from one level of development to the next. Little (1996) claimed that a learner must have passed successfully through the ZPD in order to practice autonomy in a particular task, suggesting that “cooperative learning” has potential to realize the smooth transition. In the next section, I introduce empirical studies on cooperative learning in Japanese context. I also review studies which shed light on the psychological struggles of Japanese students in EFL learning.

### Cooperative Learning and EFL Students’ Psychological Struggles in Japanese Contexts

In Japan, cooperative learning has attracted attention from English educational research and practices, including how to enhance communicative competence (Acton & Cope, 1999; Yamahiro & Mclaughlin, 1999), reading (Thornton, 1999), and working knowledge of English (Hart, 2002). This type of learning has been accepted in Japan, as the traditional style of teaching faces limitations in enhancing students’ motivations and proficiencies in English (Hart, 2002; McGuire, 1992). Studies on cooperative learning reported that learners were more likely to engage in learning and gained better proficiency, compared to traditional teaching style (McGuire, 1992).

Among the studies, Hart (2002) directly referred to autonomy and discussed that

enhancing autonomy within a group was more appropriate in Japanese culture which curtails individual freedom. He introduced the definition of cooperative learning, proposed by Olsen and Kagan (1992): “group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner was held accountable for his or her own learning and was motivated to increase the learning of others” (p. 8).

Hart (2002) designed an EFL course based on cooperative learning at a women’s college in Japan. The purpose of the course was to help students to gain “working knowledge of English” (p.35). Ninety-four students met as three parallel classes, twice a week for two 12-week semesters. None majored in English. Each class formed permanent groups, each having students in the upper and lower range. Throughout the sessions, students were asked to choose topics, conduct research, make oral presentations and finally write their reports regarding selected topics. All activities in the class were conducted in English. The topics ranged from “food production, belonging to communities, hazards and disasters to gender issues” (p. 39). To assist learning, the class introduced language learning strategies and had students discuss their own strategies.

In Hart’s (2002) study, some students became aware of how much the World Wide Web in English can provide rich information, which they had never accessed before. They also realized that they had something worthwhile to say in English such as discussing meaningful content. Hart concluded that cooperative learning was effective in promoting students’ autonomy in the Japanese environment. Hart illumined the potential of Japanese students’ autonomy within educational settings. However, autonomy encouraged in the classroom was mostly directed towards teachers. Like Hart’s (2002) study, research on cooperative learning tended to focus on the classroom setting (Nagami,

2005), and this narrow focus limited the studies from examining the multiple aspects of autonomy.

On the other hand, Little (1996) claimed that the notion of ZPD should also be applied to relationships outside the classroom, such as parents-children, peers and communities. The following study suggests the potential of study in out-of-school learning. In Japanese EFL environments, Umino (2005) gave a survey and interviewed college students who had listened to English radio programs in out-of-school settings. She found that most of the students who successfully continued the program for a long period were supported by their families. Although the description of interactions with the family was not reported, her findings suggest that learners also exercise their autonomy through collaborative learning in out-of-school settings. To gain a holistic view of autonomy, we further need to expand the scope of the focus beyond classroom settings.

In contrast to Hart (2002), who created the situation to foster autonomy, Usuki (2002) focused on exploring Japanese students' autonomy in existing classrooms through examining their voices. Informants were university students who majored in English. The data was collected from individual and group interviews. Usuki elicited the voices which indicated the major problems of Japanese EFL students:

Taeko and Tomoko talk about their preferred instructional methods.

Tomoko: We should learn by ourselves. This means that things should not only be taught, but we should also think what to learn and how to learn. So I feel something should be different from our past experience of simply receiving information from the teacher. Maybe we are now allowed to show our desire to learn actively.

Taeko: Even if we want to show our desire, the atmosphere is difficult

and we can't do it so easily.

Tomoko: Probably everyone wants to show this, this means someone should break the ice.

Taeko: Yes, yes.

Tomoko: So whether I can do it or not, at least I feel something should be changed. (p. 7)

In their discussion, Tomoko and Taeko expressed their autonomy. At the same time, they also mentioned that their learning environment makes it difficult to bring their aspirations into action. Usuki (2002) interpreted the discussion as indicating the students' psychological struggles between their reality and desire. The biggest problem in exercising autonomy, Usuki further stated, was that Japanese students often found themselves with "psychological barriers," even when they knew what they should do.

Usuki (2002) argued that the problem is primarily derived from the students' past learning experiences in classrooms. Their past learning tends to be teacher-oriented and grammar-based, emphasizing competition with one another through the examination process. Such education created an environment that prevented students from operating autonomously. Usuki informed us that Japanese students were not passive learners, as often reported, but possessed some degrees of autonomy inside. On the other hand, her study provided neither valid evidence nor discussion of where the "psychological barrier" came from and how their autonomy was able to break such barrier.

As a critique for the second approach to autonomy in general, Benson (1997) stated that the psychological approach often included ambiguity; while most studies found social constraints on exercising autonomy by analyzing the psychological aspects of autonomy, the approach often mentioned that learners were responsible to control their

autonomy. Benson argued that such approach to autonomy often leaves ambiguity in discussion as to what extent learners should be able to exercise autonomy. Take Usuki's (2002) study as an example, the implication of the study stayed ambiguous as to what extent the Japanese EFL students would be able to challenge learning environments while they have the "psychological barriers." In the following section, I further clarify which aspect of autonomy the second approach tends to overlook.

### The Political Version of Autonomy

The third approach to autonomous language learning is based on critical theory (Benson, 1997). Critical theory focuses on power and control, shedding light on how inequality and marginalization take place in people's experiences (Benson, 1997, 2001; Patton, 1990). While critical theory tends to share with constructivism the view that knowledge is constructed through negotiation of meaning, it strongly emphasizes the social context and constraint, arguing that "knowledge is not a neutral reflection of objective reality but rather consists of competing ideological version of that reality expressing the interests of different social groups" (Benson, 1997; p. 27).

In the third approach, autonomy was defined as "the capacity to take control over the content and processes of one's own learning" (p. 25). Benson (1997) named the third approach "the political version of autonomy" (p. 25), because it critically examines a political sphere regarding autonomous language learning. Benson proposed that "we need a considerably expanded notion of the political which would embrace issues such as the societal context in which learning takes place, role and relationships in the classroom and outside, kinds of learning tasks, and the content of the language that is learned" (p. 32). In this section, I explain the background of political version of autonomy. Second, I examine

Japanese EFL contexts, illuminating their problems. Finally, I discuss the significance of the third approach to autonomy in Japanese EFL contexts.

### Social Background of Autonomy

The concept of autonomy had already been developed in relation to political issues. In their review of a brief history of autonomy, Gremmo and Riley (1995) stated that in the 20 to 25 years following the World War II, the idea of autonomy became the subject of intense scrutiny, analysis, and debate in educational research and practice. One important factor to spread the idea of autonomy was the wave of minority rights movements. As the need grew for education to focus more on ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, the benefit of autonomy drew more attention. For example, the Council of Europe's Modern Language Project, established in 1971, applied the concept of autonomy to promote language proficiency of migrant workers.

According to Gremmo and Reley (1995), autonomy was an important element in the overall framework of the Council's work because of its logical entailment of the Communicative Approach. Yves Chalon, of the committee of experts, considered that autonomy would be a key to encourage adult learners to engage in authentic communication in the target language, instead of forcing them to study the formally language.

It is also notable that much research on autonomous language learning has taken place in Hong Kong (e.g. Benson & Lor, 1998; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Hyland, 2004; Nunan, 2002), which has a unique English context. For more than a century, English has been the prevalent language of the government, legislature and judiciary, even after Hong Kong took power from Great Britain in 1997 (Nunan, 2002). While Cantonese was the



major language spoken as a first language by over 95% of the population (Hyland, 2004), English was seen as the language of success which lead to higher education and a better career (Hyland, 2004; Nunan, 2002).

English has also been considered as an imposed and colonial language, a language of superiority (Pennycook, 1997). However, the majority of people, especially in Asian countries, were left struggling with the unfamiliar language, because they rarely had a chance to exercise the language in real lives, nor afford a good education (see Nunan, 2002). Considerable inequity exists in terms of access to effective English language instruction across most Asian Pacific countries. For example, policy makers and teachers across the countries frankly admitted that the quality of the education in the public sector was so low that no one learns English in school (Nunan, 2002). The finding suggested that a part of English education reproduced the inequality in society by failing to provide adequate education to everyone. Unequal educational opportunity is a major problem both in domestic and global settings as it was mentioned in the introduction section (p. 1). Such situations have forced non-native speakers of English to compete with native speakers of English in multiple spheres including academia, politics and business (Tsuda, 2008).

Under such conditions, it is surely critical to examine autonomous language learning from political aspects as an alternative way to access English learning.

Benson (1997) concluded that autonomy can be fully achieved only when the learners gain the capacity to take control over content of learning by raising critical awareness of learning environments. He critiqued that the reduction of autonomy to a technical or psychological level often divorces language learning from political and social influences. By such reduction, the approaches often end up limiting autonomy within an existing

framework. I firmly support Benson's (2002) claim that today's English learners and teachers not only need to promote language proficiency, but also to question the assumptions underlying English language learning. I also agree with Benson's perspective, pragmatically considering EFL contexts in Japan. Next section, I examine Japanese EFL contexts, highlighting their problems.

### Japanese EFL Contexts

Due to the fact that English has been a foreign language in the Japanese context, Japanese students are mostly exposed to English in formal settings, such as school (Ryan, 1997; Takeuchi, 2002). Also, the learning experience at school has been repeatedly reported to have tremendous impact on learning activities of Japanese students (Nola, 1990; Takeuchi, 2002; Usuki, 2002). This section first focuses on English education in Japan, highlighting its brief history, important policies, and current issues. Finally, I report the ways in which EFL learning take place in out-of- school settings in Japan.

English education in Japan has a long history. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the governments of Edo introduced English classes for officers to deal with foreign affairs (Takahashi and Takanashi, 2007). As the most influential event in recent eras, six-three compulsory education (*roku san sei kyouiku*) was inaugurated nationwide in 1947. This policy requires six years in elementary school, starting at age six, and three years in junior high school, starting at age twelve. English is usually introduced at junior high school. This form of education has continued until the present times. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the school attendance rate in 2001 for the compulsory education was 99.98% and nearly 97% of junior high school students enrolled in high schools. In that same year, the rate of advancement to

universities and junior colleges was indicated at 45 %.

Japanese society has faced several situations necessitating English skills, from increasing demands to communicate with U.S Armed Forces right after World War II, to business opportunities in global settings due to current economic growth (Tekahashi & Takahashi, 2007). However, not until 2000 was a foreign language made a compulsory subject in junior high school. The reason for the delay was that foreign language proficiency previously had not been considered as necessary for students to acquire. Moreover, certain scholars and people in general even showed resistance to the idea, claiming that compulsory foreign language learning would interfere with basic subjects such as math, science, and studying the national language, Japanese.

Although English was not a compulsory subject, nearly all junior high schools had been teaching English due to the reality that most high schools included English in their entrance exams (Irie, 2004). By as early as 1956, all high schools in the nation added English to the entrance exams. Since then, most of the junior high school students have been taught English under an uniform curriculum involves 105 class hours of English instruction per year, about four 50-minute classes per week. Students' English proficiency has been assessed by exams and such established structure of education has ended up producing *Jyuken Eigo*, or "English for exam." *Jyuken Eigo* has been criticized for its heavy focus on written English, especially on grammatical structure not relevant for authentic communication (Takahashi & Takanashi, 2007; Torikai, 2000).

However, to win the intense competition to get into prestigious high schools and universities, *Jyuken Eigo* has been the target to master for the students (Irie, 2004). To realize their goals, a large number of junior high school students have attended cramming schools to learn *Jyuken Eigo* (Irie, 2004). Hundreds of study books on *Jyuken Eigo* were

published; some of them have sold millions of copies (Imura, 2003).

To improve English learning environments, several reforms have been proposed by governmental organizations. Among the movements, Yamada (2003) claimed the following three policies have provided critical changes in the current English learning contexts in Japan: to introduce English at elementary levels, to make English the second official language, and to develop a strategic plan to cultivate "Japanese With English Abilities" (MEXT, 2002)

In 2002, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) implemented the first proposal that elementary school introduce International Understanding Education, aimed at familiarizing students with English conversation. However, this policy has caused much confusion in schools because the amount of time and content of teaching were left up to each school to decide (Imura, 2003). While the improvements of the course are still currently in progress, the implementation of the policy was a remarkable action taken in English education.

The second important policy was proposed by the special council to the Prime Minister on the future of Japan in the 21th century, claiming that English should be the second official language in Japan. The council emphasized that Japan should create environments where people can use English as a communicative tool. Although this proposal was not implemented, it triggered nation-wide discussion on how English learning should take place in Japan and became a resource for subsequent reforms (Torikai, 2000; Yamada, 2003).

Finally, Imura (2003) stated that the proposal to "develop a strategic plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (MEXT, 2002) as a significant policy, because it set specific goals for English education:

(For students)

On graduation from junior high school: Ability to hold simple conversations (and a similar level of reading and writing) comprising greetings and responses (English-language ability of graduates should be the third level of the STEP (Eiken) test, on average).

On graduation from senior high school: Ability to hold normal conversations (and a similar level of reading and writing) on everyday topics (English-language ability of graduates should be the second level or semi-second level of the STEP test, on average).

(For teachers)

Establishing targets: Targets for the expected English-language abilities of English teachers to be established (equivalent to STEP semi-first level; TOEFL 550 points; TOEIC 730 points). MEXT (2002)

Through reviewing the three political trends in English education, it is clear that communicative competence has become the target. Yet while Japanese governmental rhetoric stressed the development of practical communication skills, this focus was rarely reflected in classrooms which still emphasized grammar for the purpose of passing college entrance examinations (Matsuzaka, Fujieda & Mahoney, 2004; Nunan, 2002; Irie, 2004; Torikai, 2000).

According to the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (2004), 582 out of 716 colleges gave a standardized exam, mainly with reading and grammatical questions, to a total of 569,950 Japanese students in 2004. Because most parents and students want to receive better education for finding better employment in the current

competitive market in Japanese society, the main goal for studying English has become to pass such an examination. Torikai (2000) described the problem in current English education in Japan:

Junior high school would blame the entrance exam to enter senior high school as the cause for the failure in teaching communicative English, and in return, senior high schools would accuse universities for their entrance exams for the failure in high school English teaching. (p. 13)

Torikai (2000) also reported that teachers are caught up in the system, feeling incapable of handling such situations. Parents and students have also expressed dissatisfaction with English education, complaining that it did not adequately help to gain good command of English (Matsuzaka, Fujieda & Mahoney, 2004). In fact, even academically outstanding students in Japan were often assessed to be less proficient at communication in English (Torikai, 2000).

Considering the structure of the English education in Japan, fostering technical and psychological autonomy within the current structure would not necessarily help students to gain good command of English. Also, language learners are more likely to return to, or adjust the effective strategies for the established system as long as the content of learning is controlled by institutions (Benson, 2001).

In his study on language learning strategies, Takeuchi (2002) attempted to identify “successful” learners by mainly paper tests and questioning teachers in Japanese EFL environments. Without examining the contents of education, such approach assumed that successful learners were the ones who functioned well within the present English educational framework. Moreover, if English education affects students’ language learning in inefficient ways, which has often been reported so, it can be expected that the

students continue to have difficulty in English learning in the future. In fact, Nola (1995) reported that, even outside the Japanese environment, Japanese students tended to retain their learning style affected by Japanese education.

While the focus of English learning was placed on educational contexts, Benson (2002) claimed that investigating out-of-school settings has strong potential to examine autonomy, considering that students have more time and space to exercise autonomy in out-of-school settings than in school.

Moreover, there were rich resources for English learning in out-of-school settings in Japan. Ryan (1997) categorized these two main resources: those designed for English learning, and those intended to inform or entertain native speakers of English language. The former includes “the usual range of ‘four skills’ text books, graded readers, listening courses with cassette tapes, phrase books, and dictionaries.” (p. 216) In addition, it has become popular to access both TV and radio programs for English learning at several levels, which are supplied by local broadcasting media, English conversation programs at private institutions, as well as computer-based drills and games designed for English learning. The latter resources include books and magazines available at most sizeable bookshops, Internet, TV and radio programs. As potential resources, the Japanese language contains more than ten percent of loan words largely from English (Neustupny, 1987).

Despite the fact that there is such a variety of out-of-school resources, how Japanese students access these resources remains largely unknown. For example, few studies examine how Japanese learners interact with broadcast materials despite the fact that a considerable number in various formats are produced each year (Umino, 2005).

It is also critical to explore why some student do not engage in EFL activities besides

schooling because it may highlights social constraints of the Japanese students' autonomy in EFL learning. It can be highly expected that school has a negative impact on students' EFL learning in out-of-school settings, considering its impacts on Japanese students' learning styles and content which has been criticized by the public. After all, the studies on autonomy in Japanese contexts must engage into political sphere to understand the dynamic aspects of autonomy in EFL learning, which negotiate with the Japanese EFL contexts.

### Summary and Discussion

The previous sections examined the three main approaches to autonomous language learning, introducing several empirical studies on Japanese EFL learners. It also highlighted the problems in Japanese EFL contexts and that While Japanese students expressed and exercised their autonomy in a certain degree, how the social and political contexts interact with autonomy largely remains unknown. Based on the fact that EFL learning is deeply influenced by social contexts, I argued that it is important to integrate critical examination on social contexts of autonomy.

While Benson (1997, 2002) forcefully argued that autonomy should have been approached by critical examination of social contexts, he did not provide a specific framework for educational research and practice. Moreover, despite all the problems which underlie English learning, Benson (1997) stated that the critical approach to autonomy in second language learning has barely begun.

After all, each of the three approaches to autonomy has its own weakness in exploring autonomy. The deficiencies in each approach are rather natural: One particular point of view cannot grasp autonomy both ideologically and practically, since autonomy is a



multidimensional construction. In this section, I discuss the ways in which research should approach the complexity of autonomy, referring empirical studies beyond autonomy in language learning.

First, we need to examine the discourse community of learners to fully understand autonomy. Lave and Wenger (1991) claimed that learning takes place in social processes when a newcomer participates in a given community's activities through interaction with more experienced members. They also claimed that a discourse community often involves power relationships in which access to the community is limited or privileged.

Using the framework of Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory, Morita (2004) examined Japanese ESL students' struggle to become members of the academic community at a Canadian University. Morita reported that informants actively tried to participate in the academic communities through negotiating their race, gender, cultural background and language proficiency. For example, one of Morita's (2004) informants, Naoko described that some of her instructors treated her as a member of a "silent group" (p. 589). Even when she consulted with an instructor about her problems in following a discussion, the instructor "did not seem to care" or "offered no constructive advice" (p. 589). Naoko further mentioned that her gender and ethnicity became a source of isolation and marginalization in the academic discourse. From her point of view, her classmates were largely "young, undergraduate Caucasian women" and she "did not know how to relate to them" (p. 589).

On the other hand, some informants talked to instructors regarding their problems or explicitly set a goal to say something in a discussion. Morita (2004) concluded that the informants were "often creative, proactive and critical about dealing with the challenges

they faced in the classroom” (p. 597). Although Morita’s study did not explicitly focus on autonomy, the study shed light on Japanese students’ autonomy holistically, presenting their behaviors, psychological struggles and environments. Therefore, the present study also examines how learners engage in discourse communities of EFL learning to understand holistic views of autonomy.

Second, to understand the complexity of autonomy, we need to critically examine the content of language learning from broader perspectives. While such approach is still very rare in the field of autonomous language learning (Benson, 2001), several studies on literacy practice of second language learners have explored the power issues in second language learning. The line of studies (see Lam, 2004; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Tong, 1996) mainly focused on ethnic minority students in the target-language environments. These studies vividly described or reported how learners’ identities, discourse communities, and first language culture interact with their language learning, highlighting the social constrains of discrimination and marginalization inside and outside the school.

Skilton-Sylvester (2002) conducted an ethnographic study on the out-of-school literacy practices that are part of the life of Nan, a Cambodian girl in Philadelphia. By analyzing Nan’s literacy practices, such as drawing, nonfictional stories, and letters, the author found that Nan’s “own very particular subjectivities – her ways of being in the social worlds of home and school- played a powerful role in framing her literacy practice in both settings” (p. 63). The author reported that Nan’s literacy practices were creative, articulate, and powerful. However, because they have significantly different characteristics from the social and academic prestige of writing, Nan’s literacy ability was judged as inferior in the classroom.

As Skilton-Sylvester’s (2002) study suggested, examining literacy practices provides

us with critical insights in how autonomous language learning takes place as well as how it is shaped in society. Hence my study critically examines EFL literacy practices in Japan to better understand autonomous language learning embedded in social contexts.

Finally, the focus of studies on autonomy should be expanded to out-of-school settings. Benson (2001) stated that examining autonomy in out-of-school settings is a valuable because it highlights how learners take control of their learning as a natural feature of the learning process. While most studies focus on autonomy directed by others, such as teachers, examining out-of-school settings has the potential to explore autonomy initiated by learners. Such form of autonomy should also project reality surrounding the learners. Based on these advantages, the present study takes place in out-of-school settings.

CHAPTER III  
METHODOLOGY  
Research Design

This dissertation was designed as a qualitative research study. The strength of qualitative research grows from its holistic exploration of complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2002; Patton 1990). In fact, studies on autonomy in second language learning have stated that qualitative research techniques are effective to understand informants' learning experiences and contexts in depth (Benson, 2001; Umino, 2005). Therefore, the characteristics of qualitative research are suitable to achieve the goal of this study: to explore the holistic nature of autonomy in EFL learning.

Moreover, Sato (2006) pointed out that the techniques of qualitative research were appropriate when the field of study was not well-developed, requiring the researcher to explore the nature of the target phenomena. For a qualitative researcher, Bogdan & Biklen (2003) suggested:

...the direction you will travel comes after you have been collecting the data, after you have spent time with your subjects. You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts. (p. 6)

In Japanese settings, how actual autonomous language learning took place largely remained unknown (Umino, 2006; Usuki, 2002). Under the circumstance, qualitative research that inductively analyzes to the data can be considered as a powerful tool to bring new insights into the field of the study.

Particularly, this dissertation was inspired by an ethnographic study. Benson

(2001) stated that research on autonomy “should include an ethnographic dimension in which researchers should gather as much contextual information as possible” (p.187). An ethnographic study was “devoted to describing ways of life of human kind..., a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis of their people hood” (p. 38). (Vidich & Lyman; as cited in Patton, 2002). The primary methods of an ethnographic study include intensive fieldwork in which the investigator is immersed in the culture under study (Patton, 2002).

As for the specific methods, most ethnographers today employ a mixture of various methods including participant observation, interviews, and analysis of site documents (Skilton-Sylvester, 1997). For example, Skilton-Sylvester spent two years, conducting an ethnographic study on in-and out-of-school literacy practices of several Cambodian girls in Philadelphia. By tutoring for the informants, she observed their daily lives and successfully collected comprehensive data, including their interactions with others, drawing, nonfictional stories, and letters. Skilton-Sylvester’s study (1997) needed to investigate wide-ranging sites because it focused on broad concepts: identities, literacy practices, and educational policies.

On the other hand, this study required more narrow sites to be efficient since the target of this study was more focused: autonomy in learning English in the foreign-language environments. Moreover, as a stranger, a full version of an ethnographic study was expected to be very difficult in the current society, due to the increasing public concern for privacy and the increasing crime rate. Therefore, I chose to be a tutor, which would be acceptable for the informants and used some strategies of an ethnographic study, which were productive to answer my research questions, including interviews, participants’ observations, and site documents. The details of the data are presented below.

## Research Site and Participants

My acquaintance, who taught English at Midori School, a public junior high school located in one of the largest Tokyo metropolitan areas, contacted her former students who might be interested in having English tutoring for about two months. Three Japanese high school students, Akira (male), Miki (female), and Hiro (male), decided to participate in my study (All names are pseudonyms).

All three informants were fifteen years old. All three lived in the same district and were in a transitional period from junior high school to senior high school; two months prior to my study, they had graduated from Midori Public School, and then attended different high schools. While attending Midori School, Akira, Miki, and Hiro all were members of the student council: Akira in the role of Secretary, Miki as President, and Hiro as Vice President. In addition, all three had attended the same cramming schools which helped to prepare them for a high school entrance exam. The three informants had never travelled to countries which used English as a first language.

I visited each student's home, while tutoring English once a week to find opportunities to collect materials which indicate out-of-school English learning, and observe their home environments. The Midori Public School was located in a relatively low-income district. The students at Midori School often had a reputation as trouble makers who did not behave well compared to nearby schools. As an example, a former teacher at Midori School stated, "Usually, most of them did not listen to me well. It was not uncommon that students would say something to me like 'die!' or 'old bitch.'" Miki stated that some classes could be "like a noisy zoo where there was no one listening to a teacher." Among such students, the former teacher of the three informants described them as "good students behaving very well, who were minorities at Midori School"

I was apprehensive making the initial contact with the informants. Due to ever-changing trends and attitudes among Japanese students, I was not sure how I would relate to the way they dressed, spoke, and behaved in public. I initially sent text messages to the informants' cell phones to set a time and place for the first meeting. It turned out that all the informants preferred text messages as a way to communicate. After exchanging initial text messages, I met the informants individually for the first time.

From central Tokyo, it was approximately a one and a half hour train ride for me to reach the three informants' district. Inside the small station, I immediately saw two advertisements for cramming schools proclaiming, "The students of Tokyo University will teach you either at home or in class! 20 scores up is guaranteed for each subject if you are a junior high school student!" or "New individual system! Adjusted content of teaching just for your child!" When I went outside, contrary to my expectation that the area would be crowded like central Tokyo, I instead encountered green areas and empty lots.

### Data Collection and Analysis

One important process to enhance validity of qualitative research is collecting multiple types of data to support the findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Patton 1990). Creswell (2003) stated that multiple types of data enhance the validity of a study because they lead to examining evidence from different aspects, building a coherent justification for themes. Taking advantage of being a tutor of the informants, this dissertation collected data from multiple sources; fieldnotes and transcription of tutoring sessions; pre- and post- interviews with learners; questionnaires; and site documents which were relevant to EFL learning (eg. textbooks, notebooks, examination), plus

interviews with the informants' parents and a former teacher at Midori High School. In the following paragraphs, I present the ways in which the data were collected and analyzed.

While I tutored each student, I audiotaped the sessions as well as took field notes. Later, I listened to the tapes several times and transcribed some parts which were relevant to my research questions, including the informants' perceptions of EFL learning, the ways in which they engaged in EFL learning, and their learning contexts at home.

I became a tutor because I also wanted to learn from the informants' ways of EFL learning. Therefore, I provided the informants with a relatively open opportunity to learn English, by asking them to choose the learning content and discuss how they wanted to learn English with me. During the sessions, I let the students take the initiative about working on whatever they had chosen, and kept my role as a tutor to assist their activities when necessary.

To discover autonomy, it is critical to gain insider perspectives of how the learners make sense and practice autonomy in language learning (Benson, 2002). My role as a tutor provided me opportunities for getting to know the students better, drawing out the informants' voices in depth. I was able to naturally ask questions regarding their needs, desire, and struggles with EFL learning while we were learning together. In fact, the more we got to know one another, the more the informants seemed to be comfortable to talk about their feelings. As a result, the transcription and fieldnotes became critical resources to understand the informants' insider perspectives of EFL learning.

As I transcribed and took fieldnotes of the tutoring sessions, three main categorizations emerged in the data: EFL activities, perceptions of EFL activities, and EFL contexts. The data projecting EFL activities included students' explanation about



how they learned English as well as actually engaged in EFL activities during the sessions. Secondly, the data regarding perceptions of EFL activities included students' feelings and opinions about EFL learning. Finally, the data on EFL contexts were elicited when the informants talked about people and events relevant to EFL learning.

A brief questionnaire was given to the informants once a week to ensure their out-of-school activities in English learning on a daily basis. I asked how much time they spent on English learning and what they learned. I also asked questions: "What were the new things you have learned in this week?," "Did you have any opportunities to hear, read, speak, or write English in out-of-school setting? If so, please describe the situation," and "Please feel free to write your opinions and emotions about EFL learning, or your EFL learning environments." I collected the questionnaires each week, asking follow-up questions. In each session, the questionnaire became a window to open up the conversations about the ways in which informants engaged in EFL activities and their EFL contexts on a daily basis.

I also collected site documents regarding EFL learning, which the informants mentioned during interviews, tutoring sessions, and on the questionnaire. I was able to collect mainly two types of documents. The first documents directly projected informants' EFL activities, including students' notebooks, self-study books, and other learning materials. Other documents illuminated the EFL contexts of the informants, including monthly update of their cram schools, school brochures, results of various types of tests, and *manga*. The length of time of the tutoring, ten to eleven weeks, allowed me to engage in recursive process of qualitative research (Patton, 1990; Siegal, 1994), which involved going back to the field to collect more data while analyzing other data.

Before and after I tutored them, I conducted individual interviews. The first

interview followed a semi-structured format (Patton, 1990): Basic topics were covered prior to the interview, upon which were further elaborated and new topics were also introduced during the interview. The interviews employed open-ended prompts which were connected to my research questions. As for the second interview, I asked follow-up questions on the previously collected data. I also had the chance to interview the three informants' parents (Akira's father, Miki's mother, and Hiro's mother), and their former teacher at Midori High School at the end of the tutoring sessions.

The interviews were conducted to understand the informants from other points of views, as well as EFL learning contexts. All the interviews were conducted in Japanese, the informants' and the researcher's first language. Each interview lasted forty to fifty minutes and was audiotaped. I transcribed all the interviews and translated the data into English.

In processing qualitative data, themes which involve the research questions emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 1990; Patton, 1990). In analyzing the multiple types of data, I developed coding categories for the prominent phenomena. I coded "certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects' ways of thinking, and events repeat and stand out" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 173), which were closely related to autonomy. As a result, key characteristics of each informant were identified in their EFL activities. In the data which highlighted the informants' perceptions and EFL contexts, the main themes which projected social contexts of autonomy in EFL learning have emerged. These characteristics and themes are presented in the next chapters.

## The Background of the Researcher

Person 1: “What is this?”

Parson 2: “That is a pen.”

These are the sentences that I first learned in my English language class. I was a junior high school student in Japan, and it was a typical start for Japanese students studying English: Teachers gave us some model sentences as, “This is a pen,” and explained the meaning and structure of the sentence in Japanese. I used to think that it would have made more sense if the conversation was “What is this?” “What’s wrong with you dude? You use the pen everyday!” In fact, most of my friends complained how boring English class was, and I thought that was true too. It seemed like that they did not know how to learn English.

In contrast, I came to learn English through a different path than most of other Japanese students. Before I entered junior high school, my father took our family to Colorado States for a month. Although I did not understand English at all, I was impressed by American culture including the large land, big portions of food, and friendly people. I made the decision to master English because I wanted to visit the country again.

However, I did not study very hard at school. Besides the dull content of the class, I could not get along with the traditional way of teaching. It simply did not fit my learning style. I mostly learned English by myself, listening to radio programs and talking to foreigners on streets. Autonomous language learning promoted my understanding of what was happening in the class. Moreover, through learning by myself, I gradually noticed what worked for me and what did not. For example I was good at listening and speaking, and enhancing such skills effectively improved my English skills overall.

As I grew older, I expanded my interest in second languages beside English: I majored in Mandarin at the university in Japan, taught Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) at a university in Thailand, and learned Thai in both Japan and Thailand. Both learning and teaching experiences led me to realize that autonomy is crucial to improve language proficiency.

As my experience shows, I could bring my autonomy into second language learning not only based on my capacity, but also many environmental factors. While I was very fortunate to be able to take advantage of learning English, studies, newspapers, and news repeatedly reported that many students were still struggling with EFL learning in Japan. I felt that it was my responsibility to build a bridge between the growing demand for acquiring English and people's struggles with English, believing that critical examination of social contexts of autonomy will provide some implications for EFL learning.

### My Role as the Researcher and a Tutor

Prior to meeting the informants, I had little knowledge on how the current high school students learned and perceived of EFL learning in out-of-school settings. Moreover, the generation gap and my unique background in EFL learning made me feel as if I stepped into foreign sites, even though I also had EFL learning experiences in the Japanese context. In fact, I sometimes was surprised or even frustrated, to see the ways in which the students engaged in EFL learning, and their EFL contexts. For example, the following fieldnote was taken after I tutored Akira:

SVOCをまず同定してから、文法のパターンを選別し、機械的に問題を解いていく。

まるで数学の方程式を解くようだ。このプロセスを覚えるのに一体どれだけの労力を

消費するんだろうか。自分だったら正直、耐えられないと思う。

Akira identified SVOC in the sentence, and recognized grammar, and then mechanically solved the questions [on a self-study textbook]. [The process ] was like solving math equations. How much effort would it take to remember the process? If I were him, I would not have tolerated with it.

(fieldnote at the third session with Akira)

In order to understand the informants' EFL learning processes, which were sometimes foreign to me, I attempted to draw *emic* points of view from the students as much as possible. *Emic* refers to culturally based perspectives, interpretations, and behaviors of members of a certain group (Patton, 1990). Since the students were the main actors for exercising their autonomy in EFL learning, I frequently asked them to explain their activities in and perceptions of EFL learning by their own terms.

I was not able to deny the possibility that my role as an English tutor, as an older person, and as a person who was introduced by their former teacher, had influenced my informants' response to some extent. Especially, it was expected that the three informants would act as "good students" in front of me, as their former teacher described them. In fact, they were very polite with me, calling me *Sensei*, which means a teacher in a respected way. They also used polite forms in the Japanese language. However, as I tutored them, Akira and Miki frankly shared their honest opinions with me including their complaints about school and teachers, and they often used casual language. As for Hiro, he appeared to be reserved in expressing himself in a casual way. This may be also due to his own personality, which Miki described as "he rarely complained anything."

After all, the three informants were willing to talk about their private lives and cooperative in showing relevant documents including their test scores, notes, and books

they had read. The fact that I was not in the role of judging, or evaluating their academic performance may have facilitated the data collection as well. Overall, I was able to gain an insider's voice on EFL learning, which would have not been heard in educational contexts.

My role as a tutor met personal needs of the informants as well. The three students and their parents expressed their gratitude for me because they felt that support for their EFL learning was necessary. The role as a tutor maximized the possibility for me, as a researcher, to naturally observe informants and collect data at the sites.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Before data collection, I applied for the human subjects approval to the Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of San Francisco. I received their approval on May 24, 2007. Before I asked informants to sign the consent form, I provided a clear explanation about the purpose of my study and data collection procedures. The Japanese version of the Research Subject's Bill of Right (translated by the author) was handed to the informants to notify that they always retained the rights to reject my request and resign from my study. All the data was kept confidential, and only the researcher and my supervisor had access to them.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LEARNERS AND THEIR LEARNING CONTEXTS

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I describe key characteristics of the three informants: Akira (male), Miki (female), and Hiro (male), based on my fieldnotes, interviews, and materials collected during tutoring sessions. I provide data which illustrates background of each informant including his/her personality, learning attitude, and learning contexts. To address these informants from multiple perspectives, I include comments by parents and former junior high teachers, in addition to my own perspectives about the informants.

#### Akira and his Learning Context

When I first met him at the station, Akira wore jeans and a green T shirt which said “I love surfing,” in English. Later, I found that he did not like surfing at all, but he wore the T shirt just because his mother had purchased it on sale. When I suggested to him that we could talk at a nearby café, he replied, “Oh, but my father is waiting for you at home, so please come with me.” On our way to his home, I asked which high school he attended. He gave me the name of a private school in Tokyo and then immediately mentioned the *hensachi* of his school, which was about 60.

*Hensachi* is an adjusted standard deviation score. Hensachi scores had been used in Japan since the 1960s to calculate an individual's percentile ranking in examinations. The *hensachi* was used to assess how likely a student is to enter certain universities, being compared with the average scores of other students. The average scores of examination is calculated into 50 points of *hensachi*. It was also used to indicate the ranking of high schools and universities. However, the use of *hensachi* was prohibited in public schools

by Ministry of Education in the late 90's, because it intensified competition in education. Therefore, I was surprised to hear Akira used *hensachi* when describing his school. Later, I observed that Akira often used this *hensachi* when he talked about his learning or schools in general.

After school, Akira spent time in the school library or in his own room to complete assignments and prepare for upcoming classes. He did not belong to any clubs at the school. He told me his goal was to enter the Tokyo University, a top national university. His house was approximately a 10 minute walk from the station. The house was two stories of new construction and a decent size for a family of three: Akira, his mother and father. I learned that they had only moved into the house three months prior. In Akira's room, his bookshelf consisted of mainly comic books for boys.

Later in the interview, Akira told me his current interests were in Chinese history and that his interest developed after his father purchased a game version of Chinese history. Akira read and re-read comic books on Chinese history, which consisted of a set of sixty volumes. He was especially intrigued with the Han period, because of all the elaborate political strategies at that time. Akira also expressed an interest in current politics in Japan, stating a couple of times during the interview and the tutoring sessions that a majority of Japanese politicians were "stupid," or "behind many countries," although he did not provide a clear explanation of his opinions when asked further.

During our conversation, I sometimes asked for clarification what Akira meant because he would mumble his replies as well as jump from one topic to another without warning. His former teacher had the same experience, mentioning Akira may not be good at communication. She also described Akira in school saying "He liked editing the



monthly update of the student council proceedings on computer. He liked this type of work rather than interacting face to face.” Based on my observation, I had the impression that he was not used to expressing himself to others, despite having strong opinions he wished to share. The former teacher further mentioned that Akira is a person who “completes what he decides to do,” which I later observed when he engaged in EFL learning.

Akira’s high school provided fifty- minute English classes, six times a week. He had difficulties in keeping up with English in high school. He stated “I don’t have enough comprehension of the English yet.” When I asked Akira to judge his English proficiency, Akira stated “I am an average student in English class,” he further said “I always have difficulties in listening because they speak too fast on the tape.... Spoken English is totally different from what we are learning at school... I am not confident about it.” In addition, Akira rarely got a chance to utilize his English learning in out-of-school settings.

After talking with Akira in his room, I spoke with his father. Among the three informants, Akira’s father was the only father at home during our meetings. Akira’s father handed me his name card, which simply stated his name and the title of “investigator.” I learned that the prior year, he was terminated from his position as an accountant. His right wrist prevented him from performing his office duties due to an injury. Since then, he had stayed at home all day. Instead, Akira’s mother worked for a publisher and was always out. Akira’s father said “I grew up in a poor family, so I had to take care of myself since I was a college student. I don’t want Akira to suffer in that way. At least, I want to provide support for him to get into a prestigious university.”

Akira’s father referred to English as “the most important strategic subject,”

emphasizing how English plays an important role in college entrance exams. He also wanted Akira to get into *Tokushin* class in high school, which was designed for selected students to obtain advanced knowledge to enter top national universities. He constantly attempted to give Akira advice for getting into prestigious universities. When I explained to him that Akira could decide our format for tutoring sessions his father replied, “Akira and I will talk about it together and let you know.” Akira’s father appreciated my tutoring very much, and invited me for dinner twice.

Later, I found that Akira frequently gave similar responses as his father. These included English as “a strategic subject,” complaints about Japanese politicians, as well as Akira’s dream: His father wanted Akira to be “like a scientist, someone who can invent something unique,” which was exactly what Akira had told me prior. I had a strong impression that Akira’s father’s presence had a tremendous impact on Akira’s autonomy in English learning.

#### Miki and her Learning Context

When I first met Miki, she was wearing her school uniform, telling me that she had just finished classes. As a junior high student, Miki engaged in many activities: President of the student council, track and field club, as well as Judo at a private institution. Later, she practiced Judo once a week and worked as a cashier at a supermarket three times a week. Among the three informants, she was the only one who worked. Miki explained, “I cannot enjoy myself fully with money which was made from my parents’ hard work. As for my leisure, I want to earn money on my own.”

Her house was in close proximity to Midori School. The house was two stories of older wooden construction. Although the house itself was of average size, it had a large

front and backyard, where various Japanese trees were planted. Later, Miki told me that her cousin living next to her house was a gardener, and took care of her family's garden. I was never able to see or meet Miki's father, who was a businessman, but her mother was always present. During the tutoring sessions and interviews, we always met in the living room. Miki rarely studied in her own room but rather in the living room, because she tended to fall asleep when alone in her room.

Just like Akira, Miki immediately mentioned the *hensachi*, an adjusted standard deviation score, of her school at our first meeting. She told me that her *hensachi* was eight points above the average score for her high school. She only entered the school just because there were not many public high schools where she could learn business. She sometimes described her school as "easy," "stupid," and "low-level" and other students who did not study hard as "lazy," "easy," and "those people who do not think" in an accusatory tone.

Her former teacher at Midori school mentioned that Miki was likely to create a wall around her so other students may have felt she was too serious. However, she was very talkative in our meetings and often preferred chatting with me rather than focusing on learning English during the sessions. Miki spoke frankly about her feelings about teachers, friends, and other aspects of her private life. The fact that I was introduced by her favorite teacher may have helped her to relax as Miki often mentioned that she missed the teacher.

Miki had an exceptional background of EFL learning: She learned English from the age of two until the age of twelve at a private language school. Her mother had been interested in English, and wanted to have her two daughters learn English as early as

possible, believing that children could pick up languages quickly, and the knowledge would be a useful tool in finding a job in the future. Once a week, Miki went to the language school where she sang English songs, played games, and learned how to spell with both an English-native instructor and a Japanese instructor. Despite the fun learning environment, Miki often became sleepy because she was busy with assignments from her regular school. In her second year at Midori School, Miki decided to quit the language school because she needed extra time to prepare for entering high school. As for the English, Miki felt that the grammar and readings were always very difficult, although listening was “O.K. I can often guess the answer for some reason.” She did not have a chance to speak English after quitting the private language school. Miki said she “cannot speak English at all.”

Miki learned English at a high school three hours a week. When I asked her if she had other exposures to the English, she told me that her favorite singer *Ayumi Hamasaki*, who was a top artist in Japan, wrote all of her song titles in English, including “Grateful Days,” “No Way to Say,” and “Forgiveness.” Miki showed me these titles by accessing the internet through her cell phone. However, she did not mind that the titles sometimes carried unfamiliar words. She also needed to learn many technical computer terms in English related to her business studies. She showed me her notebooks, textbooks and tests from the class. Although the words were written in *Katakana*, the Japanese phonetic alphabet, most of the words were derived from English.

While she was a freshman in Midori School, the private language school offered her opportunities to study English in Australia for a month. She indicated that she wanted to go, but it turned out that she was too young to apply for the program. However, Miki later

felt “scary,” regarding the idea of going abroad by herself. Miki even became homesick when she was on a school trip to a nearby prefecture. She stated, “I just love being at home.” As for her future plans, Miki wanted to go a vocational school to gain a license of a chiropractic doctor, rather than a going to a university.

### Hiro and his Learning Context

For our first meeting, Hiro offered to meet me at the Sotetsu station, which was close to Tokyo and many train lines crossed, considering that it would be more convenient for me. We met at the station and went to the McDonald’s nearby, where we had our first conversation. He was wearing a pair of glasses, a baggy green T-shirt and jeans. Hiro belonged to the calligraphy club at high school. He was also busy with practicing a play for a school festival, in which he performed as one of the main characters. During the conversation, he told me that someday, he wants to get a chance to introduce Japanese culture abroad.

Hiro lived in one of the largest condos in the district. The building looked new and had both automatic security systems and a security guard at the front gate. He had his own room where we had the tutoring sessions. The room was always tidy. I visited his house from seven to eight at night, but I never had a chance to see his father. Hiro’s father was a busy businessman and usually came home late at night. Instead, his mother was always around and provided me with snacks and something to drink at every session.

Hiro liked playing video games and downloading music from the internet. He was also fond of reading books, particularly fantasy, such as the Harry Potter series, which he hoped to be able to read in English someday. Hiro told me that he rarely exposed himself to English beside in the classroom. At school, he had fifty-minute English class five times

a week. As for his English proficiency, he said “I cannot speak English at all. Once I had a chance to talk with a native-English teacher on a train, but I could hardly speak because of my lack of vocabulary.” He also had trouble in understanding spoken English. As for reading and writing, he described his proficiency as “so-so.”

In the future, Hiro wanted to study to be a pharmacist at a national university. He expected that entering a university will be highly competitive because not many national universities nearby had a pharmacy department. Later, I often heard that the other informants, including Akira, Miki, Miki’s mother, and his former teacher praised him for being “No.1” student in senior at Midori School in terms of academic performance. They also told me that everyone liked Hiro. Later, I found that Hiro’s high school was supposed to be the best public school in the prefecture. I would have not known these facts unless I heard from the other informants, because Hiro never mentioned it by himself.

After I finished tutoring, I noticed that he did not express his negative emotions very often, including his anger, frustration, and sadness. Instead, he was likely to make positive comments. For example, when I asked him if he ever had a bad English teacher, he said, “Never. I never felt dissatisfaction with any teachers.” In contrast, he often described his abilities in general as “not enough,” “need to work harder to improve,” even “not good at all.” I got the impression that Hiro was always attempting to stay positive for others, yet strict with himself.

## Conclusion

Based on my observation, the three participants were considered to belong to middle class. Either of their parents was a business person and they all seemed to live comfortably: The three informants lived in decent-sized houses, having their own rooms. Even in out-of-school settings, they were always busy to do school works, such as assignments, preparation for the next class, and studying for mid-tem and final tests.

Among the three, Akira's school appeared to be extreme in loading students with work. Akira had a small test of a different subject everyday, including writing fifty Chinese characters, writing ten English sentences, or translating a paragraph of classic Japanese. Such tendencies may be due to the fact that the main goal of private high schools could be sending students to prestigious universities.

Regarding English, all of the participants mentioned that they exposed themselves to English mainly in the classroom. None of them gained opportunities to practice their English orally in out-of-school settings. Akira and Hiro told me that they had difficulties in listening comprehension on English tests. In contrast, Miki mentioned that "without conscious effort," she often was able to reach the right answer during listening comprehension tests. The fact that she had been familiar with listening to English at the private language school since she was a child may explain her ability. None of them were confident in speaking which they rarely had opportunities to practice.

## CHAPTER V

### EFL ACTIVITIES IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL SETTINGS

#### Introduction

This chapter describes how the three informants took control of EFL learning in out-of-school settings, focusing particularly on their activities. The data presented in this chapter mainly came from three sources: students' learning materials; audio-taped tutoring sessions in which I also took field notes; and questionnaires and follow-up interviews on the students' learning activities that took place during the week between the tutoring sessions.

I found that three informants' out-of-school English learning activities were mainly focused on what was being learned at school. This content included homework, review and preparation for their English classes, and preparation for mid-term and final tests. Most of the students' activities were written text-based, being focused heavily on reading and writing. In fact, none appeared to practice oral skills at all.

As I observed the students' English learning activities, I found that some activities were either combined with or deeply related to each other. Therefore, instead of categorizing these activities, I introduce key characteristics of the students' activities as they emerged from the data, providing the descriptive data of their EFL activities in out-of-school settings. Finally, I present that the ways in which their EFL activities were bounded their contexts.



### Akira Emphasized Explicit Techniques

For our tutoring sessions, Akira particularly wanted to practice listening skills with me, because he rarely got a chance to practice in school. Akira chose a preparatory book for second level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP). STEP is Japan's largest testing body for English, which was established in 1963 with support from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in Japan. Akira and his parents together decided the content of his learning, and then later, Akira went to a bookstore by himself to choose the book. Akira liked the book because the answers and their explanations were indicated side by side, which allowed him to learn quickly in a method he preferred. As for the reason to prepare for the STEP, Akira mentioned:

私立で特進コースって言うのがあって、東大、京大、一ツ橋、東工大だけな、をやるところなんですけど、ま入らないよりは入った方がいいし、まあ、国立志望なんで。で、英検二級が最低条件になっているって母から聞いて。

(My) private high school has a *Tokushin* course, which prepares students for Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Hitotsubashi University, and.. I think, Toukou University [They all are prestigious national universities]. It's better to enter the course, because I want to go to a national university. My mother told me that the minimum requirement for the course is to pass the second level at Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP).

As his comment shows, Akira decided to prepare for the entrance exams of prestigious universities, although he had just become a high school student. Later, I found that Akira's English activities heavily focused on mastering techniques for exams. To practice those skills, Akira constantly focused on learning grammar and vocabulary from

several self-learning textbooks while riding on the train, at the school library, as well as at home. He also prepared for an English class at school everyday. His learning time spent on English in out-of-school settings averaged six hours per week.

Specifically, three major English learning activities were identified: 1) Identifying grammatical structure of sentences, 2) Identifying the grammatical markers, 3) Translation. At the third tutoring session, Akira reviewed his notebook with me and explained how he prepared for the class. *Figure 1* (p. 61) shows a page of Akira's notebook which presents how he engaged into the activities to prepare for his English class.

In *Figure 1*, “S” indicates subject, “V” indicates verb, and “O” indicates object, and “C” indicates complement. Akira first attempted to identify the structure of the sentence by marking such index. Although the use of such abbreviations “S, V, O, C” were commonly observed among the three informants' activities and materials, Akira exceptionally used such markers. If he could not find enough time to prepare for the English class, he simply marked “S, V, O, C” on school and self-study textbooks without “regards to the meaning. For Akira, it was an important step to understand English because his teacher advised students:

英語は暗記じゃなくて、理解の科目だって言ってるほどなんで。あ、かなり有能な先生です。英語の出来が悪い人は、文法だけ、SVOCとかそういう分け方をして、その中で「感嘆詞」とか「関係副詞」とか「分詞構文」とか、そんなことを覚えなさいって。

He even said, “English is not the subject to memorize, but to understand.” Ah, by the way, he is an excellent teacher. He told us that those who are not good at English should first categorize grammar by marking “S, V, O, C” so that they can identify

*Figure 1* A page of Akira's notebook used for preparing for his English class

something like interjection, relative adverb, and participial construction.

As his teacher specified that “English is a subject to understand, “Akira’s process of marking “S, V, O, C” was supposed to be the first step in comprehending English. In fact, the informants’ school and self-study repeatedly used to introduce new grammatical structures, or even explicitly introduced as a technique to understand the sentence structure. *Figure 2* presents one of the examples.

1. S+V+ Present particle [- ing]

- a. I kept thinking about Alaska.
- b. Crowds of children came ruining up.
- c. We go hunting in June and July.

(Cited from P. 76, *Polestar* published by *Suken Shuppan*)

*Figure 2* Indexes which appeared in Akira’s School Textbook

*Figure 2* shows that Akira’s technique presented in *Figure 1* matches the way the textbook presents the structure of the sentence. When I asked Akira how he used the index, he explained his activities, using “a. I kept thinking about Alaska.” as an example.

When Akira saw the English sentence, he first coded S for “I” and V for “kept”. Second, he identified “thinking” as “present particle,” because it follows the pattern of “S+V+ ing.” If he was not sure about the marker, Akira referenced grammar textbooks. It was often the case that the function of a certain grammatical structure was divided into several categories, so he also needed to decide which category would most appropriately fit.

Finally, Akira reached the meaning of the whole sentence by translating it. The second step, to identify the grammatical structure for the whole sentence, was also very

important for Akira. During interviews and sessions, Akira frequently attempted to identify or raise questions about those grammatical markers. Those markers included “past perfect tense,” “present perfect tense,” “perception verb,” “relative pronoun,” “active voice,” and “coordinate conjunction.”

As Akira’s teacher stated, these techniques might be helpful for Japanese students in providing specific steps to approach the structure of English which is very different from Japanese language. At the same time, the whole process appeared to be laborious and time consuming. In fact, Akira sometimes omitted the final step of understanding the meaning, because he “ran out of time.” Such activities highlight his emphasis on techniques for exams, rather than comprehension of the meaning, or memorization. This characteristics became clear when I asked him how he studied and prepared for spelling:

スペル書かないんですよね。全部選択肢だから。先生が私立向けの勉強をやっているわけですよ、要するに。だから、スペルは重視しないで、とにかく文型とか文法を覚えさせる。後、文型が一番重要だと思っています。

I don’t write out spelling, because everything entrance exam is multiple choice on exams. In sum, my teacher aims at private [universities]. So he [Akira’s English teacher] doesn’t focus on spelling but let us learn grammar and sentence patters. He thinks the sentence patterns are most important.

It became clear that Akira’s English teacher taught English with the specific purpose of preparing them for entrance exams of private colleges in which Akira described its content as “everything is multiple choice.” Due to the fact that Akira’s EFL activity was based on the teachers’ advice, Akira’s attempt to take control of English learning was heavily directed towards acquiring the techniques for the college entrance examination.

I often witnessed Akira’s application of such techniques for other situations, including

listening, speaking, and solving textbook questions. In our fourth session, Akira wanted to review “Partial Construction” because his mid-term exams were about to take place. We decided to review questions in a school textbook. Figure 3 shows the part of Akira’s textbook, which Akira and I used to work together, and Figure 4 presents Akira’s memo taken while he was working on the question in Figure 3. Based on the figures and the transcribed session, I present the process of one of Akira’s EFL activities below:

分詞構文を用いた文に書き換えなさい。 .

[Rewrite the following sentence, using the participial construction.]

1. When I was walking my dog, I saw Mr. Brown.

P. 77, *Polestar* published by *Suken Shuppan*

*Figure 3 Kakikaemondai (Rewriting Questions) on Akira’s School Textbook*

1. 分詞構文 [Partial Construction]
2. ~~接~~ S1 ~ S2 ~ S1 = S2 [The crossed character represents “Conjunction” ]
3. When I was walking my dog, I saw Mr. Brown.  
接 S1 S2
4. Walking my dog, I saw Mr. Brown. [Number added by the author]

*Figure 4 A page of Akira’s notebook*

When I asked him what would be the answer for the question (see *Figure 3*), Akira first wrote the first sentence in *Figure 4*, saying “Oh, this is Partial Construction.” Second, he wrote the second sentence, saying “There is conjunction, say, there will subject 1 and 2. I am erasing this conjunction (Crossing the letter of the Chinese character 接) then they (S1 and S2) can be equal. I suppose I should erase subject 1, 2 ? oh, I am getting confused.” Third, Akira copied the whole sentence, and identified grammatical indexes in

the sentence (see the Sentence 3 in *Figure 4*), while he was saying:

Akira: Ok, I should write partial construction...then this 'when' is conjunction and this 'I' is subject 1 and this (referring to the second 'I') is subject 2. So I should delete this conjunction (when) and subject 1. And this be-verb is the past tense.. and.. oh, wait, I am confused.

The author: This (pointing to 'was') can also be deleted.

Akira: so the answer will be..

And finally, he reached the answer by writing the forth sentence in *Figure 4*. When I asked him the question in the first place, I had expected him to answer orally. However, he engaged in the writing activity, which I was not sure what he was doing in the beginning. As he was writing and saying, I gradually understood that he attempted to follow the patterns to solve the question, just like to solving math questions based on formulas. In order to do so, he first had to explicitly identify the grammatical indexes and markers such as "subject 1," "subject 2" "be-verb" as well as "partial construction."

Moreover, after Akira found the answer, he could not answer immediately when I asked him the meaning of the sentence. Again, the process of his EFL learning activity showed that it heavily focused on explicit techniques for solving questions. In fact, Akira applied the same patterns for solving three other questions in the textbooks in *Figure 3*, and successfully drew right answers.

As he was able to gain correct answer, which was presented in *Figure 4*, Akira's techniques could be powerful tools to deal with learning materials and test questions, as he seemed to find right answers by using them. For example, the questions in *Figure 3* is called *Kakikae Mondai*, meaning rewriting questions, which constantly appeared in

textbooks and on tests of the three informants. While the technique may be helpful, Akira's activities were complicated and acquiring the techniques demanded a great deal of effort. Akira constantly practiced marking SVOC in his self-study textbook on the train, at the library, and at home. Akira voluntarily showed the textbook to his English teacher to have his answers checked.

I found that Akira's English teacher heavily influenced on Akira's EFL activities. In examining his EFL activities, I could hardly find his originality. Instead, he often mentioned about what his teacher told him to do for EFL learning. However, before concluding that Akira was a passive learner, or lacked a sense of autonomy in EFL learning, this study should understand what made him so loyal to his teacher in EFL learning. Akira may worship his teacher for a good reason, or based on his philosophy, or his EFL contexts may force him to listen to his teacher. Without understanding the background of his EFL activities, the holistic picture of autonomy could be overlooked. Therefore, I explore his EFL contexts in the next chapter, presenting data beyond EFL activities.

On the other hand, only one exception was found when Akira told me that he engaged into the English conversation with his classmates for a couple of times. It took place after school. Akira said, "someone in the class said "hey, let's speak English" and a couple of guys including me engaged in the conversation just for fun. But usually it soon faded out because we didn't know what to say." As for a topic, he did not remember at all. Although the conversation took place just a couple of times in his life, it highlighted the possibilities that Akira was also open for different types of EFL activities, which could be "fun."



### Miki Emphasized Routine Memorization

For the materials at our tutoring sessions, Miki chose worksheets provided by her English teacher. Her English teacher gave students the worksheets in advance so that students could prepare for the class and use for guiding them in subsequent classes. The worksheets were designed to match the format of a school textbook: they contained the questions about words and phrases, grammar, and readings from the school textbook. Miki wanted to ask me questions regarding the exercises on the worksheets. Later, I found that Miki used only the school textbook and provided work sheets in out-of-school settings. Miki appeared to engage in minimal activities related to English learning at school.

Besides our tutoring sessions, Miki spent approximately six to hours on English studies just prior to the mid-and final-term tests. Such behavior was in contrast to Akira and Hiro, who constantly prepared for and reviewed their English studies on a daily basis. Most of Miki's activities focused on re-reading her school textbook in order to memorize, or writing words and phrases repeatedly while vocalizing them. Miki explained about her activity as:

こうやって、括弧があって、「これに足りない語を書け」みたいな感じが出るんですよ。それってなかなか英語が苦手な人にはわからないじゃないですか。そういう時は、全部本文をしつこいぐらいに読むんですよ。読んで、読んで、読むと自然に身につくんです。

There are blanks (in paragraphs) on the tests, then the question is something like 'complete the blanks.' This kind of question is hard for those who aren't good at English, isn't it? Then, you have to read and reread the whole and it's too much. If you read and reread, then you can master them automatically.

Miki's repetition of "read" in her statement shows that she vigorously immersed herself in this activity. Her EFL activity aimed at a particular type of test questions. She explained that her method was very effective with such fill-in-the blank questions, which she often had on tests both at her current high school and the Midori Junior High School. In fact, these types of *Anaume mondai*, fill-in-the-blank questions, were constantly observed among learning materials and tests for the three informants. Figure 2 shows an example of *Anaume mondai* from Miki's final test:

(continuing from sentences elicited from a textbook)...Who (2) these beautiful islands (3) disappear under the sea? The future of the Maldives...

問3 2, 3に入る言葉をアからウの中から選べ。

Q3. Select answer from a, i, u which fill (2), (3)

(2) a. tells            i. invites            u. wants

(3) a. about            i. from            u. to

*Figure 5 Anaumemondai* (fill-in-the blank questions) from Miki's final test

Miki felt that her technique was very effective because she was able to automatically answer such questions without understanding the grammar or its context. She usually engaged in this activity right before a test because she "can earn score this way." Miki further explained about the ways in which she memorized English words and idioms:

ルーズリーフに書いて、書いて、書いて、書いて、ずっと覚えきるまで書いて。何ページもルーズリーフを使ったりとか。書いて覚えながら、喋るんですよ。書きながら喋って、独り言のように例えば、「Bring up、Bring up、何々が育つ」とか言って、言いつつ書いて、見たいな感じで。

I write in my notebook, write again and again, then write again until I remember them all, using many pages of my notebook. While I am writing the words to remember, I

say them, like a monologue, like, “Bring up, Bring up, *nani nani ga sodatsu*  
[Japanese words meaning ‘bring up’]”

In this remark, Miki also emphasized her preferred method of memorization by repeating the word “write.” Miki also used this activity for other subjects indicating business, social studies and Japanese, using in total, more than forty pages of notebooks. *Figure 6* (P. 71) shows one of the pages from her notebook

Miki’s activities may appear repetitive and rudimentary. However, *Figure 6* shows that Miki did not merely repeat the words themselves, but also actively mixed in the Japanese meanings of the words. She also adjusted the number of times she wrote each word based on how fast she could remember it. Moreover, she verbalized the words while writing them, which itself is an active exercise. Miki expressed her confidence in her EFL learning method:

中学の時は、どこが抜けているのかも書いていなくて。スペルが書いてあって、抜けていると思うところの記号を書け見たいな。そっちの方が難しいですよ。それは満点でしたよ。頑張りましたよ。それが、読む術です。

When I was a junior high school student, there weren’t even blanks on a test. They just listed the words and asked “where each word would fit in.” This is more difficult (than high school’s tests), right? I worked so hard using this technique. I got full score.

However, Miki also confessed that she had been struggling with reading and grammars to which her method could not apply. Takeuchi (2002) reported that less successful students were more likely to engage in a rudimentary memorization process. However, Miki’s activities in an out-of-school setting made sense in that they were effective, as Miki said, when taking mid-term and final tests at school.

Unlike Akira and Hiro, Miki did not intend to enter a university, and she did not have to face challenging tasks in English as much as Akira and Hiro did. While Akira and Hiro's high schools assigned six to seven hours of English class a week, Miki's school provided only three hours. Also, the textbook used by Miki's school appeared to be much easier and contained less content. The fact that her teachers often asked simple questions on worksheets and tests, as as *anaume mondai*, fill-in-a-blank questions, projected the tendency. If we consider that her activities could be improved, or not be as effective in other situations, then we also need to examine the validity of the part of the content provided by the school, which is presented in the next chapters.

The next chapters further provide data to understand how Miki's autonomy in EFL learning was limited to memorization on texts in her EFL contexts, despite the fact that she had learned English by sounds and picture for more than ten years. By examining her EFL contexts, the next chapters attempt to shed light on the holistic view of autonomy.

*Figure 6* Miki's notebook used for preparing for a mid-term test

### Hiro Emphasized Understanding Meaning

Hiro regularly prepared for as well as reviewed the English class by taking notes and working independently. In addition, Hiro subscribed to a monthly textbook program through a private educational company. On average, he spent five hours a week on English learning in out-of-school settings. Hiro's activities in English learning primarily involved translation, and writing words and phrases repeatedly.

For our tutoring sessions, Hiro chose a novel, *Boy*, written by the British author Roald Dahl. The book had notes written in Japanese at the end of each chapter explaining the meanings of selected words and phrases. The book was provided as a second textbook in the English class, 'Oral Communication.' Students were supposed to read four chapters on their own in preparation for mid-and final-term tests. However, Hiro's English teacher dedicated only a couple of hours to answering students' questions prior to the tests. For the class, students were expected to prepare themselves by translating the entire two chapters into Japanese. Hiro stated the teacher's reasoning for the assignment as:

向こうの現地の子供向けの小説らしいですよ。だから一応教育向けに作られちゃった教科書じゃないから、生の英語が楽しめる、見たいな。そういう理由で先生が選んだみたいです。

I heard that this novel is for children over there [England]. So it's not a textbook made for education, which makes it possible to enjoy authentic English. That is why the teacher selected it.

However, the book was too difficult for Hiro to the extent that he sometimes ended up spending an entire day translating one chapter of the book. *Figure 7* (p. 75) shows a page from the notebook which Hiro used at home to prepare for and review his English

class. The notebook highlights the ways in which Hiro engaged in English learning activities, along with his explanations for the activities:

ノートに教科書の本文を写して、一行あけて書くんですよ。まずわからない単語を辞書で調べて、下に意味を書いておいて。後は、もっと時間がある時は・・・新しい熟語とか文法とかが入っている文は自分で頭をひねりながら、あと、教科書の説明を見て、一文丸訳したりとか。

I copy the sentences from the textbook, writing double spaced. First, I look to the dictionary to check unfamiliar vocabulary, and write those meanings [in Japanese].

Then, when I have more time, I cudgel my brain to translate a whole sentence which contains unfamiliar words or grammar, referring to explanation in textbooks.

In contrast to Akira's emphasis on marking the grammatical index, Hiro put priority on understanding the meaning of vocabulary and sentences by referencing a dictionary as well as translating the sentence into Japanese. His phrase, "cudgel my brain" indicates that he deeply engaged in activities to understand the meaning of English. When I further asked Hiro how his methods were effective, he replied:

一番自分がわかったって思うのは、授業が終わって、この日帰って来て、ノートを見て、ここを書いておこうかなとかこの表現を覚えた方がいいなと思って、何回か書いている時が一番わかっているみたいな。

I feel like I understand the most when I am reviewing the notebook at home after school. I think like "oh, I should write out this part," or "I'd better remember this expression," and then write them out a couple of times. That's when I feel I understand the most.

As his comment shows, Hiro's EFL activities at home were comprised of two stages: first, preparing for the English class by using a dictionary and writing out the meaning of

the words and sentences of the textbook. Second, to reviewing what he had learned from the class by writing. It should be remarked that Hiro emphasized writing activities to deepen his understanding of the English. Hiro also created flash cards, which had English words on one side and their meaning in Japanese on the other, so as to quiz himself whether he really understood the meaning of the words.

Hiro had advised Miki of the importance of writing out the words repeatedly. However, Hiro's activities in writing have distinct differences from Miki's process of selecting the words and writing them out simultaneously. This gap also highlights Hiro's overall commitment to the learning activities. With his emphasis on understanding meaning, Hiro sometimes ended up dedicating too much time to learning English.

At times Hiro spent a full day translating a half chapter of *A Boy*, (Dahl, 1984) which we had used as a textbook for our tutoring sessions. Reviewing the textbook, I also found several unfamiliar words and expressions. For example, we studied the following paragraphs in our first session:

Weston- Super Mare is a slightly seedy seaside resort with a vast sandy beach, a tremendous long pier, an esplanade running along the sea-front, a clutter of hotels and boarding-houses, and about ten thousand little shops selling buckets and spades and sticks of rock and ice-cream. It lies almost directly across the Bristol Channel from Cardiff, and on a clear day, you can stand on the esplanade at Weston and look across the fifteen or so miles of water and see the coast of Wales lying pale and milky on the horizon.

In those days the easiest way to travel from Cardiff to Weston-Super-Mare was by boat. Those boats were beautiful. They were paddle-streamers, with gigantic



*Figure 7* A page of Hiro's notebook which he used to prepare for his English class

swishing paddle-wheels on their flanks, and the wheels made the most terrific noise as they sloshed and churned through the water. (p. 8)

When we reviewed these paragraphs, Hiro expressed his confusion, saying that “there are too many unfamiliar words. And also, some of the sentences are too long to break up and I am just lost.” In fact, it was not always easy even for myself to fully comprehend the paragraphs. First, there were several unfamiliar words including “esplanade,” “spades,” “flanks,” “sloshed,” as well as “churned.” Second, the novel took place in completely unfamiliar settings; a boarding school in England over thirty years ago, which made it difficult to visualize and relate to the place based on the description.

As Hiro’s teacher stated, the book might have been authentic in its location and use of language. At the same time, it was somewhat “unauthentic” for Hiro in terms of its context being irrelevant to his environment. Despite the fact that the content of the book could be very challenging for students, they were expected to translate every single sentence by themselves at home, to prepare for the tests.

I was surprised that the students, who had studied English for only three years in Japanese environments, were expected to understand such content without sufficient support. Despite these difficulties, Hiro liked the novel as a textbook because he “enjoys the process of understanding the meaning of English in the text.” At the same time, he would never be interested in reading the book in Japanese, because the content did not attract him that much.

I was also surprised that the book was used for “Oral communication” as a sub textbook. Later Hiro provided me with a copy of the final test given for the book reading. The test contained questions such as *Anaume mondai* (fill in the blank questions) which

was frequently mentioned by Miki (see *Figure 6*, p. 68), as well as translation from English to Japanese.

The content of the test and the way in which the book was treated in “Oral Communication” provided a primary reason why Hiro’s activities in out-of-school settings were heavily textbook-based. Even though the class was supposed to aim at enhancing oral skills, his school created the situation where Hiro needed to engage in the text-based activities in out-of-school settings.

Although the learning content was provided by his school, I was impressed by the ways in which Hiro committed himself in the EFL activities. Despite the challenging content, Hiro managed to translate total of four chapters of *a boy* both on his own and with my assistance. His final translation thoroughly and accurately covered every detail of each sentence in the textbook.

Besides these writing activities, Hiro had watched *Star Wars* without subtitles, trying to increase his listening skills. He did it only a couple of time when he was preparing for an entrance exam of his high school. However, he did not continue watching it because he “was not sure about its effect and soon got bored.” By “effect,” Hiro meant “improvements of my listening ability.” His comments illuminated that his autonomy in EFL learning was directed by this “effect.” The next chapters shed light on how educational achievements were presented in his contexts and how it could influenced on his autonomy in EFL learning.

### Conclusion

The ways in which the three students exercised their autonomy in out-of-school settings were directed mainly towards utilizing written texts provided by their respective

schools. These activities emphasized reading and writing. Upon closer examination, each informant's approach to the written text varied: Akira placed emphasis on the language form by identifying the grammatical markers and indexes, Miki tended to focus on memorizing texts by repetition of writing and vocalizing, and Hiro emphasized understanding the meaning of sentences by translating and writing. None of them engaged in oral activities, targeting communication.

I could observe some overlap in their activities, such as that Miki and Hiro sometimes marked grammatical indexes "S, V, O, C" in their texts, or Akira engaged in translation of the English sentences as part of his preparation for his English class. However, each student overall focused different types of EFL activities.

The differences in the three informants' backgrounds as well as their personalities may explain a part of the reason for their differences in EFL activities. Akira's activities were encouraged by the teacher who taught English aiming at entrance exams for universities. In contrast, Hiro's high school did not heavily aim at the entrance exam. It may be due to the tendency that public high schools in Japan do not advertise their abilities to send students to prestigious universities, as much as private schools do, when recruiting new students.

Although not directly targeted to university entrance examination, Hiro's assignments and school textbooks appeared to be at a high level. For example, Hiro was expected to translate two chapters of British essay *Boy* by himself, which contained many difficult vocabulary and idioms. With his perseverance in and curiosity of understanding English meaning, Hiro managed to complete the assignments at home.

Unlike Akira and Hiro, Miki did not intend to enter a university, and she did not have

to face challenging tasks in English as much as Akira and Hiro did. This context may explain the degree of Miki's engagement in EFL activities cramming for tests. These differences in EFL activities of the three informants highlighted socially constructed ways in which students exercised autonomy in EFL learning.

In out-of-school settings, the three informants did not expand their activities into the realm of English language and Anglophone cultures that surrounded the students in various ways: Akira saw that many signs at train stations were multi-lingual, Miki's favorite singer *Ayumi Hamasaki* performed her titles in English, and Hiro enjoyed reading "Harry Potter," although the book was written in Japanese. All three of them liked watching Hollywood movies with subtitles. Furthermore, they could have accessed significant English content via the internet. However, instead of actively interacting with such materials, the three informants almost solely relied on text-based materials targeting tests, or provided by their schools, even in out-of-school settings.

Littlewood (1996) categorized autonomy into two levels: proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy is directed by the self, while reactive autonomy is initiated by others. Most of the out-of-school activities of the three informants appeared to be at the stage of reactive autonomy. Littlewood stated that reactive autonomy could be a primary step toward proactive autonomy, or even a goal in its own right. His claim highlights the existing autonomy of the three informants as well as their potential in EFL learning. A few expanded activities beyond schooling, which were more likely to be proactive autonomy although each of the activity took place just a few times: Akira engaged in English speaking games with his peers after school, and Hiro tried to understand *Star Wars* without subtitles,

To my surprise, Miki did not indicate proactive autonomy, despite her unique experience of learning English. She often complained that she was overloaded with schoolwork, and such a context appeared to constrain her activities in out-of-school settings. To recognize her context would lead us to further understand the ways in which she exercise autonomy.

Also, it should be reminded that the informants' methods for EFL learning were effective in their contexts to some extent. It is critical to comprehend their contexts which made their EFL activities effective, including the content of examinations which magnetically drew the student's EFL activities in out-of-school settings. Therefore, the next chapter illuminates the ways in which EFL learning was constructed in informants' contexts and its relation to autonomy.

## CHAPTER VI

### SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED EFL LEARNING AND AUTONOMY

#### Introduction

The previous chapter presented the findings about EFL activities of the individuals. The informants emphasized different types of EFL activities. However, it turned out that their EFL activities were written-text based, targeting exams at school. Considering that learning is socially constructed (Benson, 1997; Candy, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991), it is necessary to explore the background of the informants' EFL activities to fully understand their autonomy.

Therefore, this chapter broadens the scope of autonomy to the ways in which the students' EFL learning was socially constructed, especially in relation to autonomy. Besides the voices of Akira, Miki, Hiro, I present the voices of their parents and a former English teacher to illuminate the EFL contexts. I also present other documents and materials which projected the students' EFL learning.

Through analyzing data, common themes, rather than individual differences, emerged. This was mainly due to the fact that the three informants shared the similar contexts both in and out-of-school settings. I present data according to those themes with reference to each informant's uniqueness in each theme. Three main themes emerged through analyzing the data. First, the three informants internalized a perception that treated English as a neutral and quantitatively measurable object. Second, the informants tended to value educational achievements, combining with other ideological attributes. Third, the informants were aware of problems and reality of their EFL contexts. To articulate each theme, I present descriptive data which illuminate both students' perspectives and contexts, discussing its relation to autonomy in EFL learning.

### English as a Neutral Object

Through the tutoring sessions, I observed that the informants often described their perspectives on EFL learning, using specific numbers. During the sessions and interviews, the informants, especially Miki and Akira, expressed their achievements or goals in EFL learning by stating numbers, such as test scores, ranking in class or school, number of correct answers on tests, and *hensachi*, adjusted standard deviation score which functions as an indicator of showing possibility of entrance into high schools and universities. For example, when Miki talked about her past experience at a private English school, she described her listening proficiency as:

偶然なのかわからないですけど、学校で、リスニングは全問正解でした。でも模試になってくると難しいんで。5問中3問正解とかそんな感じです。

It might be coincidence or I don't know, but I could get all right answers [on tests] in school. But when it comes to *moshi* [achievement tests which often were conducted by a private company], it's difficult, so I can answer three out of five questions correctly.

Despite the fact that Miki had studied conversational English for almost ten years at a private institution, she described her listening proficiency based on the number of right answers she could achieve in testing, not on how well she could converse in English.

Miki also often mentioned her test scores and *hensachi* when discussing her or her friends' achievements in EFL learning. Akira also described his proficiency in listening comprehension quantitatively as:

一番の問題がリスニングですね。最近自分が通っている新しい塾でも、二級はまだ無理かなみたいな感じで。[他の問題は] 合格ラインより上ぐらいは取れていると思うん



ですよ。でもこれが 30 問中 14 問とかそんな感じなんで、リスニングがまずいんじゃないかと思いますね。

I have the most serious problem with listening. I was told that I could not pass a second level [STEP examination] at the new cramming school. I think that I can earn a passing score on other questions [than listening]. But I can get the right answers 14 out of 30, something like that. So I think I am not good at listening.

Akira, like Miki, also expressed his proficiency in a very specific way using the numbers. His comments on “a passing score” also illuminated the fact that there was a numerical benchmark to judge English proficiency. In fact, it became clear that the three informants’ English achievements had been constantly measured both in school and out-of school settings. *Figure 8* (p. 84) shows how Miki’s achievement was turned into numbers in achievement tests which were often conducted by a private company in out-of-school settings. Being encouraged by their cramming school, Akira and Hiro also had taken the same tests every month. As for Miki’s English achievement, the part A in *Figure 8* reported that Miki’s English score was 43, and *hensachi* was 48. (The average scores of examination is calculated into 50 points of *hensachi*.) The average score among examinees was reported as 47. The part B shows the transitional change of Miki’s *hensachi* from October to January, indicating 48, 48, 48, 49, 48, and 48. As for the total records of five subjects, the sheet shows Miki’s rank in her school district (6,491 out of 14,113). The content of the test was divided into five categories in the part C: listening, content comprehension, grammar, knowledge of vocabulary, and composition. Each category reports the number of questions, the number of Miki’s correct answers and percentage. Finally, the part D shows *hensachi* of the school of Miki’s first choice: 44 and the possibility of entering the school: 90%.

*Figure 8* A mock test result of Miki reported by a private institution

Taking the test was encouraged by the Association of Private Junior High Schools in the prefecture. A total of 14,113 students took the test, which indicated that large numbers of Japanese students were exposed to the numbers produced by the tests, even in out-of-school settings. Not only were their test results reported, the cramming school which the three students attended also reported monthly the rankings of the top ten students. Being frequently judged by these numbers both in- and out-of-school settings should have had a deep impact on the students to internalize English as a measurable object. It provides us with a clue as to why the informants often mentioned these numbers as progress benchmarks.

In our first meeting, Akira and Miki immediately provided me *hensachi* of their schools (each high school in Japan is ranked according to the *hensachi*, which appears in guide books of entering high schools published by private institutions) when explaining about their high schools. In contrast to Akira and Miki, Hiro rarely mentioned his *hensachi* and test scores. His sense of humbleness may have led him to initially withhold his high scores and the high *hensachi* that he obtained: other informants told me that Hiro had been humble about his outstanding academic performance. However, Hiro also acknowledged *hensachi*'s impact, explaining "If my *hensachi* goes lower, well, that would shock me."

It should be noted that the numbers to evaluate EFL learning prevailed in out-of-school settings. The former English teacher at Midori School mentioned that out-of-school settings could be more extreme in using these numbers than in-school setting:

偏差値については、学校では使わない。すごい微妙なんだけど、そういう方針なんじゃないかな県の方針なのか・・・。使っているのがばれたら、問題になると思うな。要するに学校で学力テストみたいなのするんだけど、偏差値は出ないんだよね。校内順位は、見たい子には

見せるけど。だけど、塾の子は自分の偏差値ってわかっているし。(一部省略)後、外部でも学力テストがあつて、それを受けると多分わかる。だから学校で奇麗事言つて使わなくても、外でそれが氾濫していて。

As for *hensachi*, the schools do not use it. It's a very sensitive issue which may be the policy of the prefecture. If someone (at school) uses *hensachi*, it becomes a problem. For example, the school conducts achievement tests but *hensachi* is not indicated. They only show your rank within the school to a student who wants to see it. But for those who go to cramming schools, they know their *hensachi*. And then, they can also find out (about their *hensachi*) through achievement tests available outside of the school. So even though the school says that they do not use *hensachi* as a lip service, it is overflowing outside of the school.

The word “overflowing” in the teacher's comments highlights that the value of *hensachi* continued to affect students in out-of-school settings, despite the fact that their schools discontinued using the numbers as a metric. She further explained that the *hensachi* constantly appeared or was mentioned in cramming school, achievement tests created by private institutions, self-study books, and the guide books on the schools which were sold at a bookstore. The phrase “lip service” also reflects the students' reality that no matter how schools reacted to the measurement, students' English achievements were regularly turned into the numbers by their EFL contexts.

Actually, it turned out that *hensachi* was also constantly checked by the informants' parents at home. Their parents stated that they had referred to the numbers and ranks produced by the tests in order to determine which high school their children would be able to enter. Thus, the significance of the quantitative measurements for English achievement appeared to be rooted legitimately in out-of-school settings.

Miki's mother described the current learning situation, comparing when she was a student:

もう 30 年以上も前だから、環境はでも受験のための勉強をしているって言う感じがするんですけど。偏差値制って私の 2, 3 年後の人達から導入されたんですよね。その頃から、勉強勉強ってなってきた感じで。なんていうんだらう、ミドリ中学っていうか学校全体が。私達の頃は、周りに自然がたくさん残っているような時代でしたから、受験勉強とかたくさんしている子はしているって感じでしたけど、ここまではいなかった。テストテストって言うのはないですよ。でも今は、塾行ってなくても、学校の中でテストは、定期テスト、学力テストがあつて。で、塾に行っている子は塾でもテストがあるだろうし。本当に勉強、勉強じゃないかなって。私なんかの時代とはやっぱり全然違いますね。

Well, it was over thirty years ago. I feel like that students are studying targeting examination. Well, *hensachi* was introduced two or three years after I graduated (high school). It seems like not only Midori School, but also schools in general has become heavily focused on studying then. In my generation, we played more outside. So even though there were students preparing for entrance exam, we didn't have that many. There were not so many tests. But (Nowadays,) even if a student does not go to a cramming school, they have to take term tests as well as mock tests. Those who go to cramming school would have more tests there. It's all about studying. It's completely different from my generation.

Her comments illustrated that examinations had become so dominant that they become the goal of learning themselves. As Miki's mother described, when Japanese students moved forward in the current educational system, or even engaged in other activities besides studying in out-of-school settings, the students often were expected to go through multiple tests and examinations. After all, Miki's her comments projected the

three informants' reality which intensified the tests and the exams.

I become realized that the boundary between in and out of school settings become highly ambiguous, further observing the “overflowing” school values in out-of-school settings. In examining the content of the test as well as EFL materials of the informants, I also found that the language itself was treated as a neutral object. For example, exams mostly contained of the questions which had fixed answers, and took the form of multiple choice, *kakikaemondai* (rephrase question), and *anaumemondai* (fill-in-the-blank questions). They did not challenge student's creativity nor critical thinking, which are important to authentic communication.

Listening comprehension, which was recently introduced in standardized tests, also had the same feature. The questions never asked students what they thought, or stimulated their own reactions, but asked what already existed. Furthermore, most of these questions were irrelevant to the students' contexts. For example, the following listening questions appeared on *Eiken 2 kyu mondaishu*, self-study book for STEP level 2, which Akira and I studied together:

Cuzco is located in the Southeastern region of Peru in South America. It has a population of about one million people. It was first founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and became the center of the Incaic Empire. The city was destroyed by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But the military strength of the Spanish was not the major cause of the destruction of the empire. According to one record, 75 percent of Incaic people died of influenza and other diseases brought in by the Europeans.

Question: What can be said about Incaic Empire? (p. 166)

After a narrator in CD read the sentences, Akira was supposed to choose the right

answer out of four choices, which he was not able to do so. Being completely decontextualized, this type of question forces listeners to memorize what they hear. In this case, it was critical for Akira to memorize the numbers such as “one million people”, “16<sup>th</sup> century”, and “75 percent” to get the right answer. After all, the listening question was written-text based, treating English as a neutral object which could be accumulated in someone’s brain. Unfortunately, I frequently encountered this type of listening questions in the informants’ EFL materials.

The following question which appeared on Miki’s high school’s achievement test also illustrates that even the proficiency for pronunciation was measured as a object:

問1. アクセントの異なる語を下から選べ。

[ 1. Choose a word which a location of stress differs from the other three words]

1. ex-pen-sive      2. im-por-tant      3. dif-fi-cult      4. re-mem-ber

(Drawn from an examination which was conducted to measure students’ English proficiencies at Miki’s high school)

This type of question on English pronunciation was commonly observed among the three informants’ tests. When I asked Miki whether this type of question was difficult, she answered, “Yes. it’s completely different from how I had learned English sound at the private school.” At the private English school, Miki learned English sounds through picture, games, and music. However, she was not able to apply how her ability to the English treated as an object in Japanese education. Miki’s experience exemplified the ways in which tests excluded the dynamic nature of the language, as well as other alternative approaches to the language than treating English as a neutral object.

Akira’s favorite book demonstrated that English composition was not an exception

either. The book was an essay written by a student at Tokyo University, titled *sekaiichi wakariyasui toudai jyuken kanzen kouryakuhou* (The world's easiest and perfect strategies to enter Tokyo University). Akira repeatedly read the essay to motivate and guide his learning. He even called it his "bible." In the book, the author wrote about his successful learning experience to pass the entrance examination of Tokyo University. The author advised specific techniques for the exam in the book. In the section on English composition, the author stated:

英作文は暗記だ！受かる英文の覚え方

英作文はよく「英語のセンスを問う分野」と言われる。しかしこれは単なる迷信に過ぎない。私に言わせれば、英作文は暗記で太刀打ちできる分野である。一定量の例文（せいぜい 100-300 本）を暗記した上で演習を積み重ねれば、かなり良質の英文を書くことができるようになる。そもそも、語学というのは、いかに「使える表現を知っているか」が実力を左右する。

English Composition is All about Memorization! How to Memorize English Sentences for Exam.

It is often said that English composition [on examination] is "the field which requires a talent for the language." It is just a myth for me. English composition can actually be mastered by memorization. If you memorize a certain amount of sentences, say, about 100-300, and exercise, then you will be able to write very good composition. In sum, how many practical expressions you know determines your ability of language learning. (p. 30)

In the author's statement, English composition was described as an accumulation of memorized knowledge. Again, the language was treated as if it was a static object. Considering the fact that the author wrote advice based on his successful experience, his



statement projected the reality that Japanese educational contexts enhance, or even produce such a perspective. The author even expanded his theory to “language learning” in general, which shows that such a perspective on language can be maintained beyond school settings.

Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas (1991) claimed that standardized achievement tests could lead to widespread practices that they termed as “test score pollution” (p. 4). Test score pollution takes place when teachers and institutions are only concerned about students earning high scores on exams, rather than acquiring learning content. Such “polluted” practices included, “Developing a curriculum based on the content of the test” and “Preparing objectives based on items on the test and teaching accordingly” (p. 4) Test score pollution was mainly introduced as the practice of teachers and institutions.

Test score pollution takes place due to tangible consequences such as linking teachers and principals’ employment or salary advancement to students’ test scores (Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas, 1991). However, my data showed that “test score pollution” spread throughout schools, cramming schools, parents, and students. In school, the polluted practice was legitimated to the extent that teachers have no choice but to be “polluted.” The EFL curriculum was already established to meet standardized tests of entrance exams of higher institutions. The following comment of the former English teacher at Midori School illuminated this aspect.

最終的に教科書を終わらせてあげないと、子供達が可哀そうかなって。例えば、入試とかの時に、まあ、習ったことを忘れることはあるかもしれないけど、もし「ああ、こんな習っていない」とか言うのがあったら可哀そうって言うか。

I would feel sorry for students if I don’t finish teaching the whole textbook (in school). At entrance exam of high school, students may forget what they were taught.

But I would feel sorry if students think “Oh, I have never been taught this!”

Her comments illustrated the reality that teaching English at school had to aim at exams. Benson (1998) described the impact of treating English as a quantitative object:

..it seems likely that the learner will favour methods of learning that are oriented towards the explicit accumulation of knowledge about it. In metaphorical terms, the learners are likely to approach learning as if it were a matter of collecting or accumulating the items in a set. (p. 26)

The ways in which the three informants exercised and perceived EFL learning was “oriented toward the explicit accumulation of knowledge” for tests as Benson (1998) described above. He further stated that language learning practices, such as memorization, were the outcome of learners perceiving English quantitatively. In exploring language learners’ voices, Benson (1998) concluded that those who viewed language and learning process quantitatively were less ready for autonomy. On the other hand, the assumption to treat English as a quantitative object led to less autonomous language learning largely because learners often ended up depending upon the amount set by others, such as schools and other private institutions. The informants’ EFL context provided little space where allow them to engage in EFL activities in the qualitative ways.

Also, the three informants perceived and treated English as a neutral object to some extent. Considering Benson’s (1998) claim, their EFL activities, perspectives on EFL learning, and most importantly, EFL contexts can be tremendous obstacles to exercising autonomy. With the overflowing exams and solid structure of schooling, the assumption treating English as an object established a norm for EFL learning in the informants’ contexts, which could rejected students’ autonomy.

Street (1994) stated that academic literacy was often treated as if they are independent from any contexts, which could lead people to gain advantages in their society by acquiring them. Street called this type of literacy an “autonomous model.” This concept can be directly applied to the ways in which English was treated in the Japanese contexts. Street further argued that “the autonomous model” of literacy is ideologically manipulated. Because this dissertation focuses on social contexts which autonomy take place, the next section further examines how the ideological aspects of EFL learning take place in the informants’ contexts.

#### The Academic Values with Other Ideological Attributes

In the previous section, my data illuminated the ways in which English was treated as a neutral object even in out-of-school settings. The students’ comments projected that they internalized the perspective to some extent. This section further examines that how achieving “the object” could be ideologically meaningful in the informants’ contexts.

In our interviews and sessions, Akira often talked about his English teacher in high school. The teacher was a big influence on Akira’s EFL learning: As described in the previous chapter, some of Akira’s EFL activities, focusing specific skills for examinations, were guided by this teacher. Akira liked him so much, to the extent that he said “I came to like English thanks to him.” When I asked Akira why he liked the teacher so much, he said:

「これ出るぞ」って言ったものが、ほとんどかなりの確立で入試に出るとか。って言うのは実績が高いんですね。高校時代とか、大学どこ行ったとかが面白くて。簡単に説明しますと、大阪の偏差値 40 台の高校で、A 大学受けたんですけど、見事に落ちこちて、それで上京してきて一年間予備校で浪人して、で偏差値 40 から W 大学の教育部に受かって。本当

に高3までは、喧嘩したりとかラグビーで筋トレばっかみたいなの。そういう人だったらいいですよ。まじで、なんか三つの指に入るぐらい強かったとか、自分で言っているぐらいですから。

From graduates, I heard that when he said “this will be a question, [in exams]” there is a high possibility that the question would appear on entrance exams for universities. He is highly experienced. His high school days and the ways in which he entered university, this kind of thing is interesting. Briefly, he went to a high school where *hensachi* was in the 40’s in Osaka. [the number is considered as low, since average levels appear in the 50’s] He took an entrance exam at A university, from which he was fully rejected, then he came to Tokyo and spent a year going to preparatory school for university. Then, from *hensachi* of 40, he passed the entrance exam of the department of education at W university.[one of the top private universities in Japan] Until he became a senior in high school, he had just focused on fighting and working out, something like that. Really, he even said that he was one of the top three fighters!

In the comments above, Akira values the teacher’s educational achievements combining with his other attributes. “Fighting” may represent masculinity, which attracted Akira as a boy, but that alone was not enough for Akira to gain respect towards his teacher. Akira also praised the teacher for being effective in teaching as well as raising his own *hensachi*, then entering one of the top private universities in Japan.

Such a combination of values frequently appeared in the three informants’ comments and their learning contexts. Akira’s school, which was all male, distributed a brochure which included a page stating:

Be a man who does what a man has to do!... Our class has an atmosphere that

enables students to declare “I am aiming at Tokyo University!” without hesitation, and shares a sense that it is cool to study hard to obtain one’s goal. ..As a human who is standing at the entrance to adulthood, we need to deeply understand how the ways in which we spend this one year [in the class] influence our future plans.

Remembering this agenda, the *Tokushin* class move forward to “the future”

The paragraph was written to explain an advanced class in Akira’s school. The class was called *Tokushin* class, which aimed at preparing students for entering prestigious universities. In fact, our tutoring session was expected to prepare Akira for this class. Besides the class required specially designed tests, Akira needed to pass the second level at Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) for which we studied to prepare.

Although the *Tokushin* class was designed to achieve high scores in exams, it merely mentioned the score itself. Instead, the value of the test score was embedded in ideological attributes such as masculinity, and being a better human by using words and phrases such as, “Be a man,” “As a human,” and “cool.” Such use of combined values also appeared in the instruction sheet of Akira’s summer assignments for EFL learning, which was created by the English teacher. The following paragraph is an introduction part for the English assignments:

一学期、十分な結果は残せなかったけれども、惜しみなく努力を続けて自分なりの成長を感じ取っていた仲間がいた。見ていて遅しかったし、長い目で見てその努力が実を結ぶだろうと確信した。逆に、何をどうしていいかわからず一学期を過ごしてしまったものも少なからずいた。最初に掲げた目標を見返し見てくれ！（一部省略）一人一人の心が変わることを期待する。

This semester, there were friends who constantly made efforts and realized that they become more matured, even though they could not gain a satisfactory result. I

watched them becoming strong, convincing that their efforts will bring results they desired. On the other hand, some students spent this semester not knowing what to do. Remember the goal you set in the first place! I expect every student to develop one's mind.

By just looking at the paragraph above, one might not guess these sentences were made to introduce assignments for EFL learning. The teacher implied masculinity by mentioning "strong." He further related EFL learning to broader and more ambiguous notion; "develop one's mind." Akira's school was a private and boy's school, advertizing its ability to send students to prestigious universities. Hence, relating academic achievement to other attribute such as masculinity may be an effective strategy for the school to achieve their desirable goals. However, I further observed that academic achievement could be valued with other attributes, besides Akira's school contexts.

As for Miki, the combined values appeared when she praised Hiro, who was a mentor to her. Miki even said, "He is the most respectable person I have ever met." In our interview, Miki and her mother also praised Hiro as:

みき：すごいですよ。彼もまた友達に好かれていて、愚痴をほとんど聞いたことがないです。10時間とか勉強するらしいですよ。テストの前とか。でも、周りの人は「お前 頭良くていいな」みたいな。何も頑張っていないみたいな感じで。あたしも言ったことあるんですけど、後で自分で頑張ってみると、何てこと自分で言ったんだらうって。結構そういうのってむかつくんですよ。笑って、対応している、すごいな、みたいな。心が広いみたいな。

著者：あの、ひろ君のことご存知なんですか？

みきの母親：学年トップだけどそれをあまり天狗にならないよね。

みき：うちの学年トップは勉強しているから、勉強好きだから、勉強勉強みたいな。

一人できゃーって叫んでたりとか変な子なんですよ。でも勉強できることそんなにすごいだろうって言うんじゃないくて、「一位ですごいね」っていったら、「俺なんかまだまだ」って言って。「もっとすごい人がいるからもっともっと頑張んなきゃ」みたいな。すごいなって。

Miki: He's great. His friends also like him. I never heard him complaining. I heard that he studies ten hours, before tests. But people are like "You are lucky to be smart." They sound like [Hiro] did not work hard. I said like that [to Hiro] before, but later I worked hard, and I felt I shouldn't have said that. It is kinda upsetting. He respond to them smiling, and it's like he 's great and has a big heart.

Author: Do you [to Miki's mother] know him?

Miki's mother: He is a top student but never bragged about it.

Miki: A top student at my high school studies and studies because she likes study. She is strange, like she sometimes make strange noise by herself. But [Hiro] never brag about being good at studying. Once I said, "You are great for being number one" and he said, "I am not good enough. There are people who are dong better than me and I have to work much much harder than this" He's great.

Here we see another example of how educational achievement, which was expressed as "number one" and "top," earned respect when being combined with other attributes ("humbleness," and "hard work," ). Miki's comment about the top female student at her high school further shows that merely being good at studying does not necessarily earn Miki's respect. Considering the fact that Miki's EFL activities were strongly influence by Hiro's advice, such combined value can be a source to direct

autonomy in EFL learning a great deal.

I further encountered such combined values when the informants, even including their parents, talked about their cramming school teacher. The cramming school was a small private school run by a husband and a wife, with the husband as a president. Possessing a black belt, the president had also operated a Judo class in addition to the cramming school. All three informants described him as a “great” and “strict” person. Especially for Hiro and Miki, the president seemed to be an important figure: After they became high school students, Hiro continued to study at the school, even though the school was designed for junior high students and Miki started to learn Judo from the president.

At the cramming school, students were expected to work on textbook assignments, including English on their own, and at their own pace. When a student completed one section in an assigned textbook, he/she was supposed to go the teacher, (usually the president or his wife) to get feedback. When students in class became too noisy or otherwise misbehaved, the president would discipline them with corporal punishment using a bamboo sword. I was very surprised upon hearing this, as corporal punishment at schools was strictly prohibited by law, and schools in general were very cautious about this issue. When I asked the informants to describe how they felt about this type of punishment, the three essentially basically stated that those who were hit deserved it. It appeared that the parents of the three informants also respected the cramming school teacher.

Hiro and his mother praised the president as:

ひろ：すごい人ですよ。なんか、K 高校行っただけで聞きました。スポーツでも勉強でも、両方で上の方にいる人だと思います。



Hiro: a great person. I heard that he went to K High School (The top private high school). He should be ranked in a top position both in sports and academic fields.

ひろの母親：厳しい先生で、自分に対しても厳しくて、仙人のような先生です。こういう方もいらっしゃるんだなって言う……。いい影響を与えていただいたと思います。

Hiro's mother: He is a strict teacher, strict for himself too. He's like a *Sennin* [a rugged individual, who is usually in discipline] I was amazed by such a great person! He was a good influence [on Hiro]

In Hiro and his mother's comments on the president, we see that the value of the cramming school teacher was praised with other attributes (athletic, strict both with himself and others, rugged individualist) rather than merely focusing on his academic achievements, or quality of teaching. The following paragraph was written by the president for a monthly update of the school, distributed to the students and their parents. It additionally highlights the characteristics of the president and how the combined values appeared in the informants' contexts.

先日、神奈川県へ出かけた際、偶然流鏑馬神事を見ることができた。中世武芸鍛錬の代表的なもので、馬の速さに驚いたが、そのうえで矢を射る技の見事さに更に感嘆した。一瞬の勝負であり、その集中力は尋常なものではない。それは、諸君の勉学にも通じるものがあるであろう。目標突破を目指し、集中力を維持できた者が、合格の栄冠を獲得できるのだ。しかし、現代の物質社会は娯楽と消費の文化を極めたと言ってよく、快樂への誘惑は限りなく存在している。そんな中で、1つのことに精神集中することは難しく、だからこそ、現代ではそれが求められているのだ。古の武士に負け

ぬよう、諸君も集中力を高めてもらいたいものである。

The other day, when I went to *Kanagawa* Prefecture, I happened to get a chance to see *Yabusame*, which is a Shinto event.[In the event, the archers are supposed to hit the target while they are riding on running horses] This event took place in medieval times as one of the representative trainings of *Samurai*. I was surprised to see how fast the horses ran, but the most amazing thing was that the skill in shooting the arrows on top of that. Their ability to concentrate is exceptional. It may relate to your study as well. Those of you who aim at your goals and maintain the ability to concentrate will win the crown of victory in passing exams. However, it can be said that today's material world has become extreme, and seduction for pleasure is prevailing unlimitedly. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to concentrate on one thing yet it is the most needed by today's society. I expect you to improve the ability to concentrate as hard as the old Samurai did.

With those dramatic phrases, the president claimed that study was similar to a Samurai's training because both of them require "the ability to concentrate." At the same time, it requires the ability to resist seduction in "a material world." He did not elaborate further on what he meant with these ambiguous terms. But his claim shows how concepts related to learning, including achievement ("crown of victory in passing exams"), and process ("concentration") could be presented by being combined with other attributes (resistance against seduction of a material world, old Samurai's attitude towards the event). The data illuminates the fact that the students were frequently exposed to such ideologically combined values.

If EFL learners internalized such combined values, then the values may have a

strong impact on autonomy in EFL learning. Miki's comments illuminate this aspect:

その人は頑張っていてできているのに、お前って頭よくって良いなって言う発言が、あたしじゃないですけど、言われている人がいて、頑張っているから頭いいんじゃない、お前はいつも寝ているから馬鹿なんだよって思います。努力もしないのに教えてって、気軽に聞いてきて。価値観が違う。英語が苦手だって言う友達がいる、「どうしたらよくなるの?」って聞かれて、「ルーズリーフにこうやって書くんだよ」って言ったら、「そんな風にやりたくない」とか言われて。「じゃ、できないよ」って。友達ならちゃんとやって欲しいな、勉強も。

I know a person who was told, “Dude, you are lucky to be smart,” despite the fact that he’s done well because he worked so hard. I think like, “He is smart because he always works hard. You are stupid because you always fall asleep!” Without efforts those people come to me frankly saying “teach me.” Their sense of values differs from mine. I had a friend saying she was not good at English. I was asked “How can I do well [English]?” so I told her “You write in a notebook like this” Then she was like “I don’t wanna do in that way.” “Well, then you are stuck” I said. I want her to study if she’s my friend.

Miki explicitly used the term “value” in differentiating herself from the friend, based on the degree of dedication to studying English. She put the “value” in “working hard,” in EFL learning (in this case, repeatedly writing English words in a notebook just like she had done.). The “value” was so important for Miki that it even became a benchmark in selecting her friends. For Miki, the ways in which she exercised autonomy, in this case, writing words repeatedly, could entail ethical issues.

The data presented in this section overall suggested that the informants were often exposed to ideologically combined values, both in and out of school settings, and they

were likely to have internalized these values to some extent. And the internalized values could direct students' autonomy both in-and out-of-school contexts.

In the previous chapter, I found that most of the self-initiated EFL activities by Akira, Miki, and Hiro were directed toward tests. However, earning high scores and *hensachi* in English, could mean more than merely educational achievements for the informants. The ways in which teachers, parents, and students encouraged and appreciated educational achievement highlighted that it can symbolize socially respectable values, when being combined with other attributes.

This sense of combined values may impact autonomy in EFL learning at any stage. The values can be source of creating a mentor for learning, such as the cram school president, Akira's English teacher, and Hiro as a mentor for Aki. These mentors can motivate learners to choose activities, as Miki and Akira's EFL activities were inspired by their mentors. Therefore, students' autonomy was not driven merely by naturalized educational values, but ideologically constructed in social contexts. Next chapter further illuminate the ways in which the informants were aware of, and made sense of their EFL contexts.

#### Desires, Awareness, and Reality in EFL Contexts

In the previous sections, I outlined how educational achievement often entailed other ideological attributes which spread both in- and out-of-school settings. My data also demonstrated how autonomy in EFL learning could be constructed in the contexts. EFL activities, norms, and values were deeply embedded in social contexts. Under the circumstance, I found that the three informants were aware of some problems of their EFL contexts. This section focuses on problems in EFL contexts and how the students

perceived them. Finally I highlight the ways in which the students' autonomy took place in these contexts, presenting how the informants made sense of their EFL learning experience.

As presented in the previous sections, the parents of the three informants essentially facilitated the contexts which imposed students to perform textually based activities, targeting tests, such as by constantly checking test scores, and sending their children to cramming schools. However, the parents made comments that acquiring speaking and listening abilities of English as a way of communicating was the most important in EFL learning. The practical advantage of English as a communicative tool in a current Japanese society was repeatedly mentioned: When explaining why she put Miki into a private English school, Miki's mother stated: "Even when a girl becomes a housewife, it is still difficult to be financially fit these days. So I thought that Miki may be able to find a good job related to English." Just like Akira's father, Miki's mother also believed that English as a communicative tool would provide her daughter with advantage.

When claiming the importance of English for communication, the parents also referred to *kokusaishakai*, meaning an international society. For example, Akira's father stated:

あの、国際化社会ですから、海外でどんどん活躍してもらわないと困るんですよ。世界をまたにかけて。いわゆるビックビジネスって言うところは英語は必須科目なんですよ。で、会社の友人に聞いても、英語を会社で研修しているらしいんですよ。会社の費用で。だから英語の力をつけておけば、かなり大きなアドバンテージになるんじゃないかなと。で、逆に英語ができないとですね、ハンディになると思いますね。まず、聞くことが重要だと思いますよ。言っていることが聞けないと。で、その次が話すですね。読むとか書くって言うのはある程度時間をかけられるわけですよ。辞

書引いたりってこともできるけど、話すとか聴くって言うのはその場じゃないとできないんで、力をつけて欲しいって思います。

Well, it has become an international society. I want [Akira] to be successful abroad, globally. What is called “Big Business” requires English. I heard from my friend working at a company that his company provides training [for English] at the company’s expense. If one gains English proficiency, then it may become a big advantage. In reverse, if one can’t speak English, then I think it becomes a disadvantage. I think listening ability is the most important. You must understand what people say. Speaking may come next. As for reading and writing, you can spend some time on them, like looking at the dictionary. But I want him to gain proficiency in listening and speaking, because they must be done at the moment.

The comment marked a distinct contrast to what Akira’s father actually did for Akira. While Akira’s father promoted the context in which Akira’s EFL activities would be textually bounded, he expressed that the most important skill was a communicative skill, saying that they would provide Akira an “advantage” in “an international society”. At the same time, Akira’s father was the most motivated person among the three parents to support his child to enter a prestigious university. He was actively involved in the search for high schools and cramming schools for his son. Akira’s father went so far as to forcefully place Akira in another cramming school when his high school grades dropped, despite Akira’s indication that he wanted to study on his own. On one hand, the parents supported, or even created, the EFL contexts which normalized the value treating English as an object. On the other hand, they believed that communicative English was most important. Their behavior and their stated desire highlighted discrepancies in the informants’ EFL contexts.

The parents of the three informants, as well as the informants themselves, called the space where they might use English as a communicative tool the “international society.” Akira’s father mentioned current business trends as a specific example of what was happening in the “international society,” claiming that listening ability was most important to gain advantage in society. Hiro was also told by his parents that “one must be able to use English in the future, because of our international society.” According to the three informants, not only their parents but also the president of the cramming school and their teachers at schools often told them about the importance of communicative English in “international society.” However, none of the informants provided the ways in which the “international society” had an impact on their current lives.

In fact, the terms such as “global” and “international” were also repeatedly used in English educational policies, without specific definitions. For example, As one of the main goals for the reform of English educational policy, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (2002, p. 104) specified: “The main goal is to cultivate practical communicative competence to response to globalization.” Thus, at least on a surface level, Japanese education and society appeared to value English as a communicative tool.

However, the reality for the informants was very different. The former English teacher of the three informants at Midori School stated that she was supposed to introduce communicative tasks in her class, according to the educational policy. However, she vividly described her frustration in dealing with such a policy in reality:

結局さ、すごい思うのが、コミュニケーションな活動を入れろとか言っても、入試にはそれが無いんだよ。だって、リスニングテストがあるけど、聞いて答えるだけじゃない。選んで答えるだけで、会話のテストとか全然ないわけじゃない。入試が変わらないのに、

コミュニカティブなことやれって言われても、子供達だってさ。子供達は、英語勉強して何がしたいですかって質問したら、外国人と話がしたいってそういう風に思っているんだよね。でも結局は入試・・・そっちの方やらなきゃクリアできないし、そうするとコミュニカティブって言うよりもそっちの勉強に力を入れなくてはいけなくなってくる。

After all, the entrance exams do not have communicative tasks, even though they said it's necessary. Well, there is listening comprehension, but you just listen to the questions and choose the answers. There is no test for conversation. Even for kids, it makes no sense just to be ordered to do something communicative (in English) without changing the system of entrance exam. When I asked what they want to do with English, kids told me that they wanted to talk with foreigners. That's their hope. But in the end, it's all about the entrance exams. They can't get over it without studying for it. Studying in that direction must be focused on [passing the exams].

The teacher highlighted the reality of preparing students for entrance exams, which excluded “communicative tasks” and “conversation” in teaching. Her comment illustrates that a teacher also had little control over EFL learning contents. Such solid structure also may oppress the students' “hope” of talking with foreigners, as the teacher stated. In fact, I found that the Miki and Hiro wanted to be able to speak the most by learning English.

Hiro expressed his desire as:

授業で何がしたいかって聞かれたら、特にオーラルコミュニケーションでは、会話の時にもっと日常的な会話をしたいって言うか。教科書の世界の中の会話って、日常生活では使わないんですよ。日常生活の中じゃありえない会話をしていたりとか。

If I were asked what I would like to learn at class, I want to learn everyday conversation especially in “Oral Communication Class.” In everyday lives, you can't



use conversation in textbooks. Their conversation is not authentic at all, considering everyday lives.

Hiro's comments illustrated his desire to speak English. Moreover, it should be remarked that Hiro explicitly stated the discrepancies between "textbooks" and "everyday lives," saying that the content of textbook was "not authentic at all." Hiro further expressed his opinion for EFL content provided by school:

凄く別方面な気がするんですよ。こう言う勉強と、実際の、外国人の人がいてはなすって言うのは、全く別の科目っていう感じがして。なんていうんだろ、この勉強だけじゃだめっていうか。いくら教科書全部が頭に入っていて、教科書レベルで完璧になっても、話せるわけじゃないじゃないですか。だから、英語の勉強って言うか、試験とかあるこういう学生としての英語だったら、教科書読んで、文法わかって単語わかって発音できればいいかもしれないですけど、生活としての英語、英会話、コミュニケーションとしての英語には別のあるんじゃないの、とか思うんですけど。最近思うのは、留学、とか。ずっと英語で、みたいな。最近、怠け心かなんかわからないですけど、こんなことしていて本当に意味あんの？とか思って。先生とかが言うには、日本語だって喋り言葉と書き言葉って違うんじゃないですか。アメリカでも会話とか文法に沿っていないよとか。三単元のSとか使わないこともあるよとか。だからこんなに文法を堅苦しくしなくていいんじゃないのとか思ったりしますね。

I feel like it's [English education] directed to a very different way [from communicative English]. This kind of study and talking with foreigners are completely different subjects. How can I say, this type of study does not work. No matter how much I memorize textbooks and become perfect at a textbook level, I would not be able to speak [English] at all. For studying English as a student, targeting tests, it is fine to read textbooks, understand grammar and vocabulary, and

pronounce it. But when it comes to English for daily life, conversation, and English for communication, I think there should be other ways. For example, something like studying abroad, then speaking English all the time... recently came to my mind. I may have been lazy to think in this way, but I wonder if studying English the way we do makes any sense. A teacher told me that authentic conversation in America does not necessarily accord with grammar. Like, I heard that they [Americans] sometimes omit “s” for the third person singular. So I don’t think grammar should be taught strictly this much.

The comment above clarifies that Hiro’s awareness and critical thinking about his EFL contexts. Even though he had never criticized his teachers, Hiro confessed what he was learning in class, as well as in out-of-school settings was very different from “English for daily life.” He also criticized that too much focus was put on grammar at school.

All of my informants knew the EFL content imposed by the schools deviated somewhat from the communicative use of English. Among the three, Hiro’s comment was the most detailed and elaborate. However, when I asked him what he would like to learn instead of grammar, he could not specify further other than stating “something like communicative skills.” In fact, I observed that the three informants rarely had a chance to experience anything beyond the school context, because even physical out-of-school settings were dominated by school. However, one exception appeared when Miki talked about her desire in EFL learning:

英会話で聞いたのが、外国の人って意外と文を正確に書けない人が多いって言うのを聞きました。後、日本人は書けるけど、実際行っても喋れないみたいな。外国の人も文を書けないんだったら、喋ることを優先するべきじゃないかって。英語、話せるようにな

りたいですね。いところがビジネスでほとんど外国で過ごしているんですよ。中学の時は全く勉強していなかったけど、行ってみれば、だんだんわかるようになってほしいです。ベルギーが一番多いです。いっぱいお土産も買ってきてくれる。すごいですよね。

In English conversation class (at a private institution), I heard that many foreigners [who are English native speakers] cannot write correctly. As for Japanese, we can write but cannot speak when going abroad. Even the foreigners can't write, so I think that we should put priority on speaking. I want to be able to speak. My cousin spend most of the time abroad. He didn't study at all at a junior high school, but I heard that he had gradually understood English. He often goes to Belgian, buying me many gifts. It's it great?

Miki's comments illustrated her desire to speak English as well as her awareness that Japanese English education put priority on "writing" opposing to her desire. When she talked about her desire, Miki mentioned her cousin who went abroad. It was the only time when Miki talked about English beyond school settings. As for Hiro and Akira, they did not have any chances to expose themselves to English beyond school setting at all. Overall, the lives of the three informants seemed to be constrained by schooling.

While the structured system thoroughly provided both persons and materials to guide the textually-bounded activities, no sufficient support was found for the communicative skills in English for the "international society." The disconnection between the informants' EFL contexts and authentic use of English was illuminated by Akira's comments:

何か英語って、本当は使わない人は使わないんじゃないかって思うときがありまして。まあ、理系で言うと論文ですよ。英語で書かなきゃいけない。まあ、会社に入ったとしても、結局人によるかもしれませんが、何かいまいち、それらしい実感が湧か

ないな。海外に住みたいとかも全然思わないし。日本がいい。

I sometimes think that some people actually never have to use English. Well, for those who major in science, they have to write their thesis in English. Well, if you work for a company, it might depend on people. But I felt it's unrealistic. I don't want to live abroad at all. I like Japan.

By using the word “unrealistic,” Akira illustrated the reality of EFL contexts surrounding him. The authentic use of English did not occur in his daily life nor did it provide specific advantages. Thus, he could hardly imagine the ways in which he made use of communicative English. In contrast to the “unrealistic” situation, Akira specified the logic of entering a prestigious university in his context as:

良い大学行ったら、会社がたくさん選べるってことも多いですよ。後は生涯収入ってやつですよ。お金がすべてじゃないですけど、お金ができないとできないことも多いですから。早慶になると、生涯で約3、4億稼ぐって言われていますね。普通のサラリーマンで。平均してか。すべてにおいて、東大、京大、早稲田、慶応、上智が入るのかな……。が……。が将来稼ぐお金は3,4億といわれています。MARCHレベルって呼ばれている中堅の大学があるんですよ。明治、青山、立教、中央、法政。これは、ざっと生涯年収が、1,2億かな。フリーターだと6千万って言われています。確か、純利益で。##先生から教えてもらったんですけど、何故良い大学を目指すのかっていう理由をはっきり教えてくれるところがいいですよ。

If you enter a prestigious university, then you can have many choices as to which company to work for. Then, it's about how much money you can earn in total in your life. Money doesn't mean everything but there are many things you can't do without it. As for Waseda and Keio [Both are prestigious private universities], graduates were supposed to earn on average 3, 4 billion yen. [approximately 3.1

million U.S dollars] Well, in case they become business persons. Oh, it might include Tokyo, Kyoto, Waseda, Keio, and Sophia University. And there are universities belonging to what is called the “MARCH” level, which is the middle level. They are Meiji, Aoyama, Rikkyo, Chuo, Housei Universities. Their life-earning salary is supposed to be 1, 2 billion yen [ approximately 1.1 million U.S. dollars], something like that. If you are a part-time jobber, you are likely to earn 60 million yen [approximately 545 U.S. thousand dollars], for net income. My English teacher told me this. It’s nice of him that he provided us a clear reason why we aim at a prestigious university.

Being very specific, Akira’s comments on the reason to study for universities made a sharp contrast to his comments on using authentic English. It was highlighted that educational achievement would be translated into an ultimate number; money, which can be a goal of Akira’s learning experience. Akira’s appreciation for his English teacher, “It’s nice of him that he provided us a clear reason,” also showed that Akira’s willingness to make use of the educational context as an instrument for his future success. EFL learning was deeply embedded in such a process as Akira and his father often stated that “English is the most important strategic subject for exams.” In other words, being aware of the discrepancy in EFL reality, Akira directed his autonomy in EFL learning towards his future success.

Considering the structured reality of EFL learning which was legitimized even in out-of-school settings, the way in which Akira’s autonomy took place made sense in his context. Actually, Miki also showed the same type of attitude towards EFL learning. In conversation with her mother, she frankly talked about her motivations for study:

みき：家の学校で、一番か二番の成績だと推薦もらえるんですよ。

母：今の日本だと、やっぱり就職するには大学いくっていう、皆が学歴社会になって  
いるから。私は、勉強しないんだったら、学校行かなくてもいいんじゃないかと思  
いますね。

みき：そうは言っても、実際高校行かないと就職先ないって言うのもあるんじゃない。  
あたしも、高校来なくていいんじゃないって言われた。

母：本当に？

みき：バイトしたいって言われたら、じゃあ高校来なくていいんじゃないって言われ  
て。何考えてんだこの野郎って思っちゃって。だから好きでこんなところ来てんじや  
ないよって。就職したいから、やりたくもない勉強も一生懸命やってんだよって。

Miki: If you are one of the top one or two students at my high school, you can  
gain a recommendation (to enter university without entrance exams).

Miki's mother: Well, today's Japan became a school-record society, so it's like one  
needs to go to university to get a job. But I don't think a person should go  
to school if she doesn't want to study.

Miki: But practically, you can't get a job without going to high school. Even my  
teacher said to me, "you don't have to come to school."

Miki's mother: Really?

Miki: When I said [to my teacher] that I want to work after school, he said  
"Well, then you don't have to come to the school." I felt like what is this  
jerk thinking of? I did not want to come to this kind of place [school]. I  
study so hard even though I don't want to, because I wanna get a job.

Miki explicitly explained that although she actually did not like studying, she  
studied hard in anticipation of her future career. Her use of the term "practically" showed

that she was well aware of school's role as a legitimate gatekeeper which powerfully screened people based on their educational background. Miki further told me that she did not prepare for a final-term English test during her final semester at Midori School because "the result of the tests do not affect entrance to high school, and won't be provided to the high school. Other students were like me too."

To some extent, Miki perceived English in educational contexts as a tool to get a job, in much the same way as Akira did. However, she did not aim to enter a university as Hiro and Akira did, and did not require intense EFL learning. For her, passing grades in each semester were adequate in EFL learning. Miki's words, "I study so hard even though I don't want to, because I wanna get a job," made me realize that her ways of engaging in EFL activities, memorizing the minimum amount of EFL contents for tests, also made sense in her own context.

Among the three informants, Hiro was obviously an outstanding student. With his curiosity to understand the meaning of English, Hiro managed to prepare for his English classes and to deal with assignments. Moreover, He was most curious about using English besides school settings. When I asked him what he wanted to use English in the future, Hiro stated:

夢みたいなもんなんですけど、とりあえず、英語の新聞とか小説とか英語の翻訳する前の原書ですか、ああいうものを読みたい。映画は字幕なしで観てみたいとか。後は洋楽も聞いて意味がわかるようになりたいですね。大きくなった時には。

It's like my dream, I want to be able to read something like English newspapers, and original English novels. And I want to watch movies without subtitles, and want to

understand English songs by listening when I grow up.

His curiosity for English clearly illustrated how he emphasized understanding meaning in EFL activities. However, it was also true that all of the content of his EFL learning was provided by school targeting tests and that his EFL activities were also oriented toward tests. Although Hiro tended to reserve his explicit opinion on this matter, he showed a similar attitude as Akira and Miki toward EFL learning. Regarding the EFL content provided by his school, he simply stated:

そんなに面白ってわけじゃないですよ。新しい発見があるわけでもないし。まあでも、関係ない、どうでもいいって言うか。

Well, it's (EFL content) not that interesting. There is nothing new to discover. But after all, I don't care as it doesn't matter.

Through observing the three informants, I realized that the English language, as well as EFL content, was not important for my informants. What was the most important for the informants was to prove that they function well in their contexts through mastering EFL learning.

The three informants' attitudes and responses may explain well why they did not seem to express frustration or resistance to EFL learning provided by school, even though they were aware of problems in their EFL contexts. Despite the fact that they hoped to study communicative English, they painfully knew the reality that doing well on tests matters first and foremost. Moreover, the three informants were "good students" at school. They behaved well, and they were often liked by teachers. Because they had been good students, they may have been highly aware of the advantages of making use of the schooling system. For example, Miki and Hiro were able to bypass the standard entrance exams to enter their respective high schools by obtaining written recommendations from



the Midori School as a result of maintaining high scores in term tests. Akira's statement which related his learning experience to money also illuminated his awareness of his contexts. While such attitudes in EFL learning may be interpreted as a submissive attitude towards the system, it should also be emphasized that the informants attempted to make use of the system for their own success and advantage.

Akira's favorite comic book series, *Dragon Zakura* (Cherry Blossoms of Dragon), clearly further illustrated this aspect. The story was about the efforts of a young teacher in preparing low achieving students from less than ideal schools to pass the entrance examinations for Tokyo University, the top national university in Japan. Akira repeatedly read this comic book which later motivated him to prepare for the entrance examinations of Tokyo University. In the comic book, when the teacher attempted to convince students to prepare for the examination, he stated:

社会のルールってやつはすべて頭のいいやつが作っている。それはどういうことか…。そのルールは頭のいいやつに都合のいいように作られているんだ。(一部省略) いいか！賢いやつはだまされずに得して勝つ。馬鹿はだまされて損して負ける。だまされなくなかったら、損して負けなくなかったらお前ら勉強しろ。

All the social rules were created by smart people. It means that the rules were made just for the convenience of the smart people.... Listen! Those who are smart win without being tricked. Those who are stupid lose by being tricked. If you don't want to be tricked and lose, then you must study.

In the comic book, the significance of studying was introduced as a tool to gain advantage in Japanese society. Its logic was that once the students enter Tokyo University, they gain tremendous advantage in Japanese society. Although the comic book was not realistic and oversimplified many social factors, it certainly projected a Japanese society

which heavily emphasized examinations. I was able to see why the comic book was appealing to Akira to the extent that it made him prepare for entering Tokyo University. For a person born and raised in a context which has imposed a solid framework on learning, making use of the structure should be a valid way in which autonomy can occur.

Merely looking at the three informants' autonomy in EFL learning, especially in the classroom, one may have ended up judging their autonomy as reactive autonomy aiming to earn a score on tests, or even as a passive attitude which could not count as autonomy. However, from a broader perspective, the three informants' autonomy in EFL learning was a part of the process of actively gaining advantage and navigating themselves in their contexts.

### Conclusion

This chapter presented that the informants' contexts, regardless of in-or out-of-school settings, often treated English as a neutral object. In fact, this prevailing perception set up norm for EFL learning through solid structure of schooling, including examination. Such contexts led to less autonomous language learning largely because learners often ended up depending upon the amount set by others.

Moreover, parents, teachers, and the students turned out to value the educational achievement, combining with other ideological attributes, such as masculinity and work ethics. The educational achievement was also strongly tied to the students' future success in the informants' contexts. These facts were intertwined with each other, and deeply affect the students' capacity to take control of their EFL learning. For example, the values symbolized educational achievement as the evidence of hard work, or masculinity, and created high expectations for performing well in schooling. They also become a source

for creating the informants' mentors. EFL learning was deeply embedded in this context and ideologically directed toward examination.

In the contexts, students had the least power. Their hopes for learning how to speak English were ignored and unsupported. However, further data illuminated the aspect that the three informants attempted to make use of the social structure to their advantage, and they utilized autonomy in EFL learning for the processes. The ways in which EFL learning activities, students' perspectives on EFL learning, and social contexts were strongly tied to each other in Japanese contexts. To understand the learners' autonomy, it is critical to get this whole picture.

After all, the three informants' EFL activities were not adequate for practicing English required in a current society. Nowadays, business, academia and other fields require English as a communicative tool, not merely as an object in texts. Considering the strong and widespread structure imposed on Japanese students, the final chapter critically examines social constraints on autonomy in EFL learning in Japanese society.

## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION

#### RECONSTRUCTING AUTONOMY IN JAPANESE SOCIAL CONTEXTS

##### Introduction

The previous chapters highlighted that schooling strongly colored EFL activities and the three students' perceptions of EFL learning, crossing the boundary of in-and out-of-school settings. Based on the findings, this chapter attempts to shed light on the informants' autonomy in EFL learning in Japanese social contexts, discussing potential social constraints on autonomy.

In analyzing the data, three domains which potentially constrain autonomy in EFL learning were identified: schooled society, school-based discourse community, and "international society". I illuminate the ways in which each context socially constrained autonomy in EFL learning, causing disadvantages for the learners and society as a whole. Finally, I draw implications for educators, researchers, policy makers, and language learners.

##### The School-Based Discourse Community and Autonomy

My data showed that both the students and their parents shared common ideas, values, expectations, which were strongly tied to schooling. For example, they repeatedly used particular terms which were centered around schooling, including *hensachi*, *tokushin* class, and *moshi*. They all valued academic achievements, combining them with other ideologies. It turned out that Miki and Hiro's mother were deeply involved with the Parent Teacher Association in Midori School, helping various in-school events for

students. These facts demonstrated that the informants had formed a school-based “discourse” community.

Gee (2004) defined discourses as “ways of behaving, interaction, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities by specific groups” (p. 3). This conception provided a more appropriate framework when examining EFL learning in regards to the three informants’ learning contexts, because the boundary between in-and out-of-school settings, which I had initially attempted to identify, turned out to be highly ambiguous.

The school-based discourse community had been so influential, that it sometimes could even overpower the school as an institution. My data regarding out-of-school settings, including the parents’ comments, cramming schools, private school brochures, and self-study books showed that they strongly shaped students’ EFL performance. Moreover, school values spread not only from school to the school-based discourse community, but also from the discourse community to the school itself. In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) released a new policy under the name of *Yutori kyouiku* (relaxed education), with the reasoning that students should “cultivate rich humanity (MEXT, 2002).” The *Yutori kyouiku* was lunched based on four main policies:

1. To enrich humanity, sociability, and the awareness of living as a Japanese within international society.
2. To develop the ability to think and learn independently.
3. To inculcate fundamental concepts in children at an appropriate pace while developing their individuality.

4. To let every school form its own ethos. (MEXT, 2002)

The policy explicitly included and outlined the notion of autonomy in point number two, using the word “independently.” Based on this policy, the public schools reduced academic loads by approximately thirty percent. However, the public heavily criticized the policy, worrying about the possibility of decreasing children’s academic abilities (Ogi, 2002). According to the survey conducted by *Nihon PTA Zenkoku Kyougikai*, Parent-Teacher Association in Japan in 2004, over 75% of parents expressed anxiety over the reduced academic loads (cited in Ogi, 2002). In fact, the parents of the three students also expressed worry about the policy, stating that their children might be at a disadvantage for academic achievement under the new policy.

Ironically, the policy ended up causing parents to send their children to private schools and cramming schools in order to make up for the reduced learning content and reduced class load (Ogi, 2002). Partially due to the public criticism, the Ministry of Education reverted to the former academic workload in 2006. This educational reform and public reaction shows that the schooled-based discourse community or a schooled society as a whole can play a vital role in modifying environments for autonomy of students, sometimes overpowering schooling itself.

In any given community, learning takes place in social processes when a newcomer participates through interaction with more experienced members (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The EFL learning processes of the three informants can be well defined as the learning processes embedded in the social context inherent to participating in the school-based discourse communities. The students’ EFL activities were mainly designed and targeted towards their test scores. However, my data showed that they were not merely

numbers. Being combined with other ideological attributes, the numbers became powerful symbols representing not only educational achievement, but also the ability to become a successful member in the school-based discourse community and Japanese society as a whole. Since English played a vital role in the examination system, the three informants' autonomy in EFL learning activities were their attempts to participate in the school-based discourse community.

My data showed that the three informants were constantly exposed to and influenced by “experienced members” in the school-based discourse community. All of the informants' parents had personally experienced entrance examinations derived from the school system and felt compelled to share their advice and opinions with the informants'. The parents facilitated the students' learning contexts in various ways. For example, Akira's father selected Akira's high school, tutor, and cramming school in an attempt to send Akira to a prestigious university. Akira's father was motivated to help Akira, based on his own experience in preparing for university entrance examinations, which he vividly described:

あきらの父親：自分の昔の頃は、経済的なことがほとんどすべてでして、あの、塾にもいけないと。問題集一冊買うにも四苦八苦していた状態なんですよ。で、子供に対しては同じ事を繰り返さないようにと。・・・あの、東大か一ツ橋かと言うところは迷ったんですけど、模擬試験の結果を見たら、東大を受けてもいいって言われたんですけども、学風が一ツ橋の方が好きだったんで、最後は自分で決めたんですけども。塾にも行っていなかったから、志望校を決めたって言うのは学校の先生と、あと、友達との情報交換とかそんなものなんですよ。

筆者：勉強は全部ご自分でされていたんですか？

あきらの父親：通信教育だけやっていたね。ラジオ進学講座ってものがあった

ですね、旺文社なんですけどもね、テキストを買ってラジオを聞いて勉強するんですよ。で、それに添った形で模擬試験があつて。で、あなたの合格率は何パーセントということですよ。

Akira's father: In my case, which was long time ago, what it all mattered was my financial situation. Well, I could not afford to go to cramming school, and could hardly afford to buy a single self-study textbook. I do not want my child to suffer like me. I was not sure if I should take the exam at Tokyo University or *Hitotsubashi* University. Although [a teacher] told me that I could take the exam at Tokyo University, looking at my results of *Mogishiken* (mock exam), I made a final decision myself to take the exam of *Hitotsubashi* University, because I liked its academic atmosphere. I did not go to the cramming school, so I chose which university to go to, based on information exchanged with my teachers and friends.

Author: Did you study by yourself?

Akira's father: I did distance learning. There was a radio program, conducted by *Obunsha* (company's name). You buy a textbook and study by listening to the radio. They provided mock exams according to the content, which told you the expected pass rate for the entrance examination [of Universities].

Despite the fact that his experience in preparing for the university entrance exam was about thirty years ago, Akira's father used the terms that were still repeatedly mentioned in the three students' EFL context, including *Moshi* (mock examination), and *Goukakuritsu* [pass rate for entrance examination]. Akira's father also told me that he sometimes tutored Akira as many of the questions on the examinations were "basically the same" as thirty years ago. It suggests that the school-based community has been thoroughly formed over decades. Akira's father's experience shows that he was able to



become an experienced member in the school-based community. Akira's father later told me that through internet research and attending briefing sessions at various schools, he chose ten high schools for his son, and then finally picked the high school that Akira was attending, based on the ratio of graduates who went on to prestigious universities.

Other parents also supported their children's cramming school studies and to select their high schools. Besides the parents, the president of the cramming school and certain teachers played roles as "experienced members." The adults not only transformed knowledge of EFL learning, but also encouraged and inspired the students, using other ideological attributes, such as personal strength of character, muscularity, and work ethics as my data showed.

Using the framework of Vygotsky, Little (1996) claimed that a sense of autonomy in language learning can be acquired through interactions with more skilled persons. My data suggested that students' capacities to take control of EFL learning were already developed to some extent through pre-existing interactions with more experienced members in the school-based communities. The three informants' autonomy in EFL learning was directed toward becoming good members in this discourse community.

However, at both behavioral and psychological levels, the school-based discourse is legitimized to a great extent that individual autonomy in EFL learning can be heavily oppressed. I observed that the students' hopes in learning English were given the lowest priority. The three students wanted to be able to use English for communication, but there was not adequate support for their hopes, in sharp contrast to the fact that the EFL learning for examination purposes was constantly reinforced by the experienced members of the school-based community.

Takahashi & Takanashi (2007) reported that the more Japanese students move forward in the school system, the more they tend to dislike English. The study showed that EFL learning was directed towards a more unfavorable direction for the students themselves in the community. This tendency suggested that many students were being screened out in the process of schooling, before they could be exposed to real aspects of English as a dynamic language. As a result, students in the discourse may have disadvantages, because broader contexts than the community would demand English as a communicative tool.

There is also a strong possibility that English learners who are members of the community may form *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) of treating English as an object. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* refers to a persons' internalization of their own culture. *Habitus* forcefully influences the pattern of self-directed adult learning, including the ways in which learners view learning, as well as themselves as learners (Candy, 1991).

In fact, I observed that the idea of English as an object was already internalized to some extent by the informants. For example, Akira described his current goals in EFL learning as:

使役と知覚と関係代名詞をしっかり固めて。で最近やったところでは、強調構文と分詞をしっかりと固めておくって感じなんで。そこら辺を固めたい。

I need to solidify causality, perception verbs, and relative pronoun. Recently, I have learned *Kyochokoubun* (a grammatical structure which highlights a certain meaning in the sentence), and partial construction, which I need to solify. I want to solidify these areas.

Akira's use of the term "solidify" suggested that he already treated English as an

object, as if he could physically touch and shape the language with his hand. Signs of Japanese students' *habitus* as a consequence of examinations were also observed in other studies. Takeuchi (2002) discussed that university students in Japan tended to maintain their learning strategies, including memorizing idioms and whole sentences, which were developed for a university entrance exam. It is suggested that if learners formed the *habitus* of treating English as an object, then this *habitus* strongly limited learner's capacities to take control of learning English as a communicative tool. In fact, Akira had great difficulty in speaking English, because his perceptions of English interfered with his fluency. When Akira attempted to say "I will definitely go to Tokyo University," what he actually said was, "Well, it is *ikimasu* [meaning "to go" in Japanese] so it is a present tense, right? Oh, 'definitely' comes before or after 'go'? Well..." Akira's utterance shows that his *habitus*, which treated English as an accumulation of objective knowledge. Such *habitus* clearly interfered with Akira's oral fluency.

Hiro also experienced the situation that made him realized his way of learning English was not much useful for communication:

この前 ATL の先生と喋ったんですけど、やっぱり書けても読めないって言うか。紙相手だったら結構、書いて文章にしたりとかできるんですけど、いざ喋ってみると全然喋れなくて、で、こうなると、将来大きくなった時に、全くダメだと。

When I talked with English speaking teacher, I realized that I can write but speak. If I am in the front of paper I can write sentences. But when it comes to speaking, I can't speak at all. In the future, it will be totally useless to be like this.

Hiro contrasted his speaking ability with his writing skills, which may be his *habitus*. Although Hiro's academic performance was outstanding, he realized that his approach to English would be "totally useless" in his future. In reality, English is dynamically

constructed through interaction with people. Therefore, the school-based discourse community misled students' autonomy in EFL learning, forcing its norms which was not useful to the outside of the community.

### Schooled Society and Autonomy

As I got to know my informants' daily lives, I further observed that the overflow of exams into out-of-school settings took place not only in the students' EFL learning, but also in other fields, which left them little free time. By the end of her first year, Miki had to obtain qualifications in bookkeeping and computer science by passing tests conducted by authorized institutions. If she failed, she would not be able to advance to her sophomore year.

Akira's case was more extreme. He was preparing for an exam to enter the *Tokushin* class, a class offered by his high school to prepare students for top national universities. He was additionally going to take a required exam to enter another prestigious cramming school which also prepared students entering top universities. Furthermore, Akira had five tests related to different subjects each week in school. As for Hiro, he prepared for the third level of *Kanjikentei* (Test of Chinese Characters) as well as the third level of Society for Testing English Proficiency to "ensure his abilities" on his own volition. Later, I found that these tests would have increased his chances to bypass a general entrance examination of high school. After all, the students spent inordinate amounts of time preparing for these exams.

The weight put on these exams extended even into other areas than studies at school such as art and popular culture. When asked about his goals and reasons for practicing calligraphy, which I had assumed to be his leisure hobby, Hiro explained that he wanted

to pass a first level Brush Examination, supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT).

According to the website of *Nihon shosha ginou kentei kyokai* (the association of testing for calligraphy skills in Japan), the test content included knowledge on the theories and history of calligraphy, as well as skills tests. The tests were divided into six levels, and one becomes qualified to teach calligraphy after passing the first level test. To my surprise, a total of eighty colleges and universities were listed on the association's website, as willing to "add scores or provide favorable treatment" on entrance exams if a potential student passed the Brush Examination. Thus, even a hobby based on a form of artistic writing could be measured by tests and was related to university entrance exams.

In Akira's situation, he became motivated to gain entrance to Tokyo University after reading a comic book, *Dragon Zakura* (Cherry blossoms). Each chapter introduced specific strategies and information for the entrance examinations. For example, the 105<sup>th</sup> story introduced how much time should be spent on respective questions in the English examination of the Tokyo University. The comic book ran for 11 volumes and was an overwhelming bestseller in Japan. In 2005, it won Excellence Prize authorized by Agency of Cultural Affairs in Japan. The comic book was so popular that it was later made into a broadcast as a dramatic series on Japanese television.

This emphasis on the value of schooling, which spread throughout Japanese society, coincided with the concept of "schooled society" (Illich, 1970). Illich used the term to critically refer to a society in which the value of school becomes dominant. Illich criticized school for ideologically restricting autonomy in learning, and reproducing the social inequality. The dominance of the school value in the present Japanese society has

been pointed out by Japanese sociologists (see Miyadai, 2000; Kimura, 1999; Ueno, 2002). In observing Japanese high school students' lives, Miyadai (2000) described the current schooled society in Japan as:

In the late 70's, the standardized evaluation has rapidly been adopted. If students were not good at studying in a school, at home, they would be told "You got a lower score at mid-term!" and at a cramming school, "You will not be able to enter – junior high, or -high school!" Such students has no choice but to live with an internalized self image as "I am the person who is incapable of studying," not only in school, but also at home and in society.

(P. 146) Translated by the author

In 1979, the first standardized entrance examination was introduced, with the support of the Ministry of Education. The standardized exams were first employed by national universities and later extended to private universities. According to the website of the National Center of University Entrance Examinations (2007), a total of 553,352 students applied for the examination. Also considering the fact that the rate of students who went to colleges and universities was approximately 50 % in current Japanese society (Ogi, 2002), we see how widely students have been under the influence of the high values placed on exams.

Miyadai's (2000) statement further discussed that the values of a schooled society were imposed not only on those who performed well in school, or decided to attend university, but also on students who do not receive good grades. In fact, even those who enter the university may suffer a sense of inferiority in learning due to the hierarchal system of education in Japan. Ueno (2002) reported that Japanese students who entered a

university ranked as low level internalized a sense of inferiority, showing low confidence in learning. Such a phenomena supported Freire (1970)'s claim that oppressed people internalize a sense of inferiority. As a result, such low self-esteem may prevent students from exercising their autonomy.

Scholars (Bourdieu, 1977; Illich, 1970) have pointed out that school has functioned to reproduce social inequality. In Japanese settings, Ueno (2002), Miyadai (2000), and Kimura (1999) also claimed that the Japanese educational system has legitimized hierarchy in Japanese society. Even public high schools had rankings within the district: Their rankings are explicitly indicated by *hensachi*. People within the district immediately could identify the students' achievement levels just by hearing the names of high school.

By entering their respective high schools, the three informants were physically separated from the majority of students at Midori School, which had a bad reputation. I also observed the sense of separation internalized among the informants. Miki and Akira referred to the students of Midori School as “fussy,” and “low-level.” Miki further condemned her friends and classmates who did not study hard as: “lazy,” “stupid,” and “easy” people. According to the informants' former teacher and Miki, Hiro had many friends with whom he socialized regardless of their school performance. However, Hiro described his relationship to some of his friends as:

タバコ吸ったりとか、授業いなくなったりとか、いますよね。後輩とか同学年の友達にもいることはいましたね。最初は友達だったんですけど、そういう風になったから、接点がなくなっちゃって言うか、話さなくなっちゃって。そういう風になる前は、普通に話したりとか、遊んでたんです。やっぱそういう集団があるじゃないですか。向こうがそうい

う風になったら、そっちの集団に移っただけで、自然と。

There were some who smoked, or disappeared during the class. I had friends like that in both my same class and below. We were friends at the beginning, but because they turned out to be like that, we lost connection, like we didn't talk anymore.

Before they became like that, we would usually hung out and talked. You know, there is that kind of group. After they became like that, they moved to that group, then it's automatic [ that Hiro and the former friends did not talk anymore. ]

Hiro frequently used "that" to refer to those who did not behave properly at school. The use of the word suggests that Hiro differentiated himself from people who did not behave in a manner which he considered appropriate in school. "Automatic" also suggested us that the separation took place socially.

The three informants in this study were "good students." Even though the content of English had immense problems, at least the three informants could make sense of EFL learning at school because they gained an advantage within the educational system. On the other hand, low-achieving students were not able to gain such advantage at all.

Moreover, EFL has played a vital role as a screening device. Akira and his father repeatedly mentioned that English was the most important subject on university entrance exams. In fact, no matter which department students wanted to enter, Japanese universities in general required English exams. In contrast, subjects such as mathematics and science would not be required at certain departments or be elective subjects.

As a result, school severely limited equal access to EFL education at higher education for those who could perform well for examination. It was often the case that educators attempted to encourage students' autonomy or communicative skills in the university



settings (see Hart, 2002; Ryan, 1997). Because the university curriculum was more flexible than that of high school which was closely tied to entrance exams, English teaching in university settings took various forms. However, Japanese students who did not enter universities, which approximately 55 percent of high school students (Ogi, 2002), were screened out before they even reached the EFL classes at a university level.

Even after education ended, Matsushige (2002) reported that university graduates who used English for communication earned 6% more income than those who did not use English in the workplace. In such a reality where English functions as a tool to reproduce social inequalities, autonomy in EFL learning has strong potential as an alternative approach to English. Individuals should critically reflect on how their EFL learning would be marginalized, or even marginalize other people's opportunities to learn the language. Individuals should also seek their own ways to direct their capacities to take control of EFL learning against the inequalities produced and reproduced through EFL learning.

Finally, the school reproduced inequality in both gender and economic status (Kimura, 1999), which may also result in limited access to EFL learning opportunities. Kimura distributed a survey to junior high school students. She divided the students into two groups according to the parents' educational background and their father's occupation: white collar students (n=197) whose both parents received higher education and fathers occupations were intelligent work; and blue collar students (n=92) whose either or both parents graduated from high schools or junior high schools, and father's occupation was physical working. Kimura found that more white-collar students aimed at entering universities than blue collar students; more male students aimed at entering

universities than female students. Kimura also mentioned the fact that while most male students went to four year universities, more than fifty percent of female students chose two-year colleges.

Kimura (1999) further investigated that female students tended to show less confidence in regard to studying than male students. The study results reminded me of how masculinity was ideologically used in Akira's learning contexts. Also, the president of the cramming school used Samurai spirit to encourage students. In both of these cases, femininity was absent; in fact, during collecting my data, I could not find any evidence of an ideological use of femininity in EFL contexts. Kimura's findings may help to explain the situation of Miki, who did not consider entering a university despite the fact that she had remained a good student. Ogi (2002) further reported that those who supported the educational trend which treated learning content as an object, tended to be males who successfully went through the Japanese educational system. Indeed, gender inequality produced by school seemed to be closely tied to inequality of access to EFL learning, which needs to be further examined.

#### “International Society” and Autonomy

In collecting data, I noticed that the informants, including their parents, frequently associated the “international society” with English. Since it is “international,” it should have been natural that other languages should be mentioned in this context. In fact, globalization has been an ongoing trend within Japanese society. The Ministry of Justice (2006) announced that the number of foreign residents had reached its highest number, 2,084,919 and that the top three largest nationalities of the foreign residents were Chinese, Korean, and Filipinos. Akira also told me that now most signs at train stations were

written in multiple languages, including Korean, Chinese, and English. Despite the increasing diversity within Japanese society, the concept of “international society” always appeared to be dominated by English hegemony in the school-based community.

Although the “international society” appeared ambiguous for the three students, it actually had a strong influence on their EFL learning. For example, a British essay, *Boy*, assigned to Hiro was used in an “Oral Communication” class. The class was recently introduced as a part of educational reform in English education by the Ministry of Education. In explaining the reform, the Ministry of Education (1999) also used “international society” several times to describe the current society, as well as the need to learn English. Actually, the Ministry of Education repeatedly uses “global” in governmental documents when making English education policies.

Helping Hiro to translate the British essay *Boy* (see p. 68), I felt uncomfortable about the fact that Hiro had to learn and understand the unfamiliar British words and settings in English, before he gained a chance to express himself with the language. Hiro told me that his English teacher selected the essay so that students could learn “authentic” English.

In both cases, the “international society” was misconceptualized, pressing English hegemony and cultural imperialism on the students. Some scholars (Macedo 2003; Pennycook, 1994; Tsuda, 2008) warned that the dominance of English causes social injustice, inequality and discrimination. Pennycook (1994, p. 13) forcefully argued:

Widespread use (of English) threatens other languages; it has become the language of power and prestige in many countries, thus acting as a crucial gatekeeper to social and economic progress; its use in particular domains, especially professional, may exacerbate different power relationships and may

render these domains more inaccessible to many people; its position in the world gives it a role also as an international gatekeeper, regulating the international flow of people.

I am concerned that the prevailing misconception of “international society” in Japanese society may hide the problems caused by the dominance of English. The concept of “international society” could also make the informants into passive receptacles who merely receive information from other dominant cultures. Thus, the students’ autonomy may be deeply oppressed by their misconception of a international society. Because it is “global,” learners’ autonomy should take place amid opportunities to share their own cultures and thoughts with others, as well as to think critically about English hegemony which can marginalize other cultures and languages.

Japanese EFL learners also need to be aware that they could be oppressed by the hegemony of English. Tsuda (2008) pointed out that EFL learners, who comprise a population of about 5 billion, or 84% of the world population, are most likely to be at a disadvantage in the hegemony of English. Tsuda stated that EFL learners usually show low proficiency because they learn English as a school subject, rarely using English in daily communication. Tsuda further emphasized the reality that “we have not chosen to use English. We are made to learn and use English. That is not free choice at all. English is imposed” (P. 54). Here is another reality that the students would need to face beyond the school-based community. Although my informants, Akira, Miki, and Hiro were aware of the advantage of English, they were not aware of the unequal assumptions underlying EFL learning which may cause a disadvantage in their lives.

As responsible humans living in a society, Freire (1970) claimed that individuals

need to engage in “integration” (p. 4) rather than merely adaptation to the world. He explained the concept as: “Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality” (p. 4). I believe that “integration” is extremely important for the learners to explore their capacities to take control of English learning in a broader context, and to utilize those capacities not only to improve one’s English proficiency, but also to improve society as a whole.

### Conclusion

This study highlighted that regardless of in- or out-of-school settings, school values were so dominant that they constantly regulated the informants’ EFL learning. School values were shared and reproduced by the school-based discourse community. The three informants’ activities and perspectives of EFL learning were constructed in the discourse community. For example, educational achievement combined with other ideological values was reinforced by other members of the community, such as teachers, parents, and cramming school teachers and the informants internalized those values to a certain extent. When we look at the informants’ autonomy in EFL learning in relation to the discourse community, their autonomy was directed towards becoming a better member in the discourse community.

Foucault (1980) pointed out that the power does not merely belong to a dominant agent, but to the discourse as a whole. My study identified not only the private educational institutions, but also schools, parents, and even the students themselves played the roles as agents, reproducing assumptions to treat English as an object and ideologies combined with the school values. In other words, multiple layers of power influenced students’ autonomy in EFL learning in the school-based discourse community.

Among the power relationships, the informants stayed as the least powerful figure, having little space and support to negotiate their autonomy in EFL learning.

I further criticized that schooled society and myth of “international society” may strongly constrain Japanese students’ autonomy in EFL learning, causing inequalities to access EFL learning. I raised questions for these contexts and discussed that we need to change them for alternative approaches to EFL learning.

Kohonen (1992) claimed that autonomy as implied in the notion of interdependence, “that is being responsible for one’s own conduct in the social context” (p. 19). Supporting his claim, I propose that EFL learners need to raise their awareness of these social constraints as a primary step to expand their sense of autonomy in EFL learning beyond the school-based community.

#### Implication for Educators, Researchers, and Policy Makers

First, one of the primary findings of my dissertation was to identify the school-based discourse community. The three informants were constantly exposed to school values even in out-of-school settings, being a member of the discourse community. This process impacted, or constrained the three informants’ autonomy in EFL learning. The findings suggested that educators and researchers should be concerned about not only in-school settings, but also out-of-school settings in order to understand autonomy in context.

Secondly, the recent trend of fostering autonomy in language learning is based on the assumption of changing “passive” learners into active learners (Usuki, 2003, p. 12). However, it is perilous to reach the conclusion that learners are “passive” only because they did not actively initiate learning English. My dissertation presented that learners had already developed their sense of autonomy in EFL learning in relation to the school-based

discourse community. Rather than “foster” autonomy, which is frequently used in the field of autonomy in language learning, it would be more appropriate for educators to help students to “negotiate” their developed autonomy within and beyond their own communities.

Pennycook (1997) warned that not “aware of the social, cultural and political contexts in which one is working, may lead at best to inappropriate pedagogies (p. 44).” Thus, teachers and other educators who attempt to apply the concept of autonomy to the Japanese EFL context need to explore the ways in which learners negotiate the reality in the school-based community, as well as pre-established autonomy acquired by learners in the community.

Third, Freire (1970) explained the importance of awareness of social constraints in order to be actively involved with the social context that may oppress human desire. Luke (1995) also claimed the importance of critical thinking about the social structure in relation to language learning. I agree with their claims. As for my informants, raising awareness both of the imposed ideas and their own internalization of these values, such as treating English as an object, would be a primary step towards finding a way to negotiate their autonomy within social contexts. Critical examination of these political realities would guide learners to bring their autonomy in language learning into contexts beyond school.

In analyzing the data, I noticed that the informants rarely gained opportunities to explore social contexts out of the school-based discourse community. “International society” largely remained an ambiguous concept for them, to which they had difficulty relating. The only exception I observed was Miki’s cousin who was not good at English

in school, but later took several business trips abroad. Even though they rarely met, Miki enthusiastically talked about the cousin, saying he told her how important English could be in business. People such as Miki's cousin, who once belonged to the school-based community and later gained international experience, have a potential to bridge the discrepancies between English used in the community in Japan and English used outside of the community.

Finally, Little (1996) claimed that encouraging autonomy in language learning becomes effective through collaborative rather than individual decision making. Based on my findings, I agree with his point of view. Because the informants' EFL activities and perceptions of EFL were deeply rooted in their school-based discourse community, an individual's efforts to foster autonomy might be firmly blocked by social constraints.

It was suggested that the process of fostering autonomy can be most effective through the involvement of others. In the Japanese context, Umino (2005) found that learners who successfully listened to English radio programs in out-of-school settings tended to be supported by their family. Expanding such collaborative learning opportunities to out-of-school settings could be considered as one of the most important challenges in the Japanese setting. Ueno (2002) and Miyadai (2000) stated the majority of Japanese students no longer have their own communities in out-of-school settings, because of the schools' dominance in current Japanese society. Providing informal spaces where students can escape from school values has strong potential to develop their proactive autonomy. Instead of establishing other systems within school contexts, policy makers should explore ways to support community-based activities.





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