

PhD thesis defense report

Name of PhD candidate	上田美和 (Miwa Ueda)
Title of thesis	Learner Autonomy in Elementary School English Classroom: Japanese and Dutch Teachers' Perceptions
Director and members of evaluating committee	Montserrat Sanz Lori Zenuk-Nishide Donna Tatsuki Stephen Brown (Konan Women's University)
Date	January 30 th , 2024. 10:00-12:00. Classroom 502.

Summary of the thesis
<p>Learner autonomy (leading to global human resources) is, according to MEXT, a key goal of education. According to the Ministry, this involves self-direction and responsibility. Implementing abstract goals of this kind in the classroom is a complex matter since the concept of autonomy means different things for different teachers.</p> <p>At the same time, English proficiency among students in Japan is far from the goals set by the government: out of 111 countries ranked, Japan occupied the 80th position. The first position of that ranking is occupied by The Netherlands. Differences in language proximity and in when English was adopted as part of the official curriculum in primary education are a fact, but the author of this thesis explores another factor: the perception of teachers about what learner autonomy means and how it can be implemented in the classroom to address the goal of students achieving proficiency (which is the same for the education authorities of both countries). For this, both a quantitative (a teacher survey) and a qualitative (interviews) study were conducted among Japanese and Dutch teachers. The questions were aimed at finding out: 1) the perceptions of teachers about learner autonomy; 2) the ways in which they work or advise to work to provide better support for the development of learner autonomy; 3) the obstacles and cultural factors that impede the development of learner autonomy.</p> <p>The results of the thorough analyses of the data provided in this dissertation indicate that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Japanese and Dutch elementary teachers perceive the same categories of learner autonomy (i.e., freedom of choice, self-insight, self-expression, problem-solving, curiosity, and independence), although significant differences were found between the two countries. Japanese teachers emphasized that freedom of choice and self-insight were important, while Dutch teachers emphasized students' responsibility in learning because being independent learners is important.

2. Japanese and Dutch teachers are already implementing those aspects of teacher support in their English lessons. However, while Japanese teachers emphasized their preference for English-only classes, the Dutch teachers focused on the need for parents' support in learning at home (in the Netherlands, some English classes are already taught in English).
3. Teachers from both countries want to incorporate freedom of choice by having students set their own goals and create study plans.
4. Teachers in both countries face difficulties such as insufficient teaching skills (resulting in teacher-dependent or textbook-dependent classes) or teaching all English levels of students at once. This is attributed to a shortage of teachers and to too few English classes in both countries. Japanese teachers commented on the lack of confidence in their English skills and the Dutch teachers expressed their concern with the lack of support and a lot of pressure from parents.
5. Regarding cultural factors that affect student autonomy, schools in Japan foster autonomy through sports day and engagement activities (*kakari katsudo*), while schools in the Netherlands foster autonomy through the implementation of theme learning or project work without textbooks. (Collaborative group work is a common feature of both countries. However, in Japan, there is a tendency for the group to come up with one answer, whereas in the Netherlands, opinions of individual students through dialogue with teachers were respected). Thus, in Dutch elementary schools, the students gain self-confidence through dialogue with teachers. This self-confidence leads to further challenges. The author of the thesis speculates that this factor may be at the root of their excellent position in the English proficiency ranking.

Notes about the defense

The defense took place on January 30th, 2024, at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies (classroom 502), from 10:00 to 12:00. The candidate presented her dissertation for 30 minutes, after which the members of the committee asked questions and offered their comments.

The presentation by the candidate was outstanding. She summarized her dissertation very efficiently in a series of perfectly designed slides.

The committee commended the candidate for her work and pointed out that it was very good that the dissertation had established that learner's autonomy is not a Western notion, since both Japanese and Dutch teachers recognized its components and claimed the importance of fostering it, and both Ministries of Education state so in their guidelines. Likewise, it was recognized that autonomy does not mean

that teachers are not necessary, but that the role of the teacher is different than in controlling-style education.

When asked to choose what was the major difference between the Dutch and the Japanese teachers who participated in the research, the candidate referred to question 5 of the study, that is, the cultural factors that prevent the implementation of the desired learner's autonomy. The answers reveal that group work does not always mean autonomy, since in Japan, the group consolidates its argument in one response, whereas in the Netherlands the various responses of the members of the group are recognized and valued.

When asked about the main problem that hinders learner's autonomy in Japan, she alluded to the fact that the teachers themselves have never experienced learner autonomy and therefore training is necessary if the guidelines by MEXT are to be followed.

Teachers in Japan tend to fix the time for each step of an activity, instead of allowing students time to generate different ideas. In the discussion with the committee, it was also pointed out that teachers do not have time to plan or to coordinate the teaching with their colleagues, as well as the fact that parents are not as involved in education as their Dutch peers.

It was discussed that children and teachers in Japan must participate in many activities like *kakari katsudo*, sports day, etc., which are not optional and which follow a set format. So, they are not used to options within the curriculum that would allow them to be more autonomous. These activities are considered beneficial for the children. Therefore, in order to foster the autonomy that MEXT proposes, it was discussed that, whereas the activity of sports day could continue to be mandatory, it could be designed in a way that students had a choice in which competitions to participate, etc. That kind of option seems to be at play in Dutch elementary school classrooms. For instance, students can choose the place in which to study at certain times. Teachers are there as guides.

It was pointed out that the textbooks in Japan are quite infantile. They look like pre-school books, although they are aimed at 5th and 6th graders. This is a difference with the Netherlands. The candidate had brought the books that she analyzed in the dissertation and the members of the committee were able to look at the contents.

The candidate was asked to insert her opinion and interpretation of the data in several parts of the dissertation, in a bolder way than it currently appears in it.

Other issues, like lack of self-confidence in their English ability that Japanese teachers often quote, features of the system like large classes and lack of time to

practice English, and the different meanings that concepts like responsibility may have in both countries were discussed.

It was established that, whereas the data do not permit to conclude that the only factor in the difference in proficiency between students in both countries is learner's autonomy, it seems indeed like a very important one that should be considered.

Evaluation

The dissertation was deemed an important piece of work, well executed, well sustained with appropriate and rigorous research tools and useful for other teachers. With the exception of requests like minor adjustments to the way that the secondary references are quoted, a few places where some typos remained, and instructions to the author to insert her opinion in a few sections where the comparison between both countries yields notable facts, the dissertation in its current state is considered worthy of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.