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Fostering the Development of Language Learner Autonomy Through Peer- and Self-Assessment

Scott J. Shelton-Strong, Asia University, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract

Autonomy and assessment have been the subject of renewed interest within the field of education. English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts have attracted particular interest as the importance of learner autonomy for language learners continues to be researched and acknowledged, while an understanding of the relationship between assessment and autonomy continues to grow. Questions remain, however, as to whether autonomy lends itself willingly to assessment, or if, indeed, there are unobtrusive and practical ways to do so. Nevertheless, assessment and autonomy may be related at other junctures. This paper outlines a classroom-based intervention whereby assessment descriptors were used to engage university age English language learners in Japan in reflection and response, as one of the tools used in a continuous assessment approach to the evaluation of participation and communication. An examination of the background and context underpinning this intervention is first provided, followed by an analysis of learner responses to questions related to self-assessment. In conclusion, ways in which these may be viewed in relationship to broad indicators of autonomy, and the development of metacognitive awareness are discussed.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, reflection, assessment

Autonomy in language learning is an important goal worth directing our learners towards and few today would dispute such a claim. Despite areas which continue to attract debate (e.g. assessment, cultural appropriacy), a general consensus among scholars and language teaching practitioners in support of this goal has continued to grow over the past several decades (Benson, 2011b; Lamb, 2017; Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017; Mynard, 2011). There are a number of important reasons for this. First, learners begin to gain control over the ways in which they are able to approach or direct their language learning (Oxford, 2017). In addition, preferred learning styles can be enabled in pursuit of effective learning strategies (Shelton-Strong, 2017). Furthermore, in support of lifelong-learning, the capacity for taking appropriate decisions and initiating action can be developed through a focus on reflection, dialogue, trial and error (Tassinari, 2015). Reflection is recognized as a key element in fostering autonomy (Everhard, 2015a; Little, 2004, 2007) and can take a variety of forms, including a focus on past and current learning, and the ability to function effectively in the target language (Cotterall, 2017).

Whereas the assessment *of* autonomy has garnered attention recently, this paper will instead investigate how assessment descriptors were used with the aim of *developing* autonomy and self-awareness. As such, this paper will report on the use of descriptors to engage learners in reflection through peer- and self-assessment, as an integral part of a continuous assessment approach to formal evaluation of progress made on a course of study. It will be argued that by providing opportunities for self-evaluation as a means to reflect on both learning and performance in class, learners not only exercise autonomy in doing so, but also take the important first steps towards the development of the metacognitive awareness and vision which can aid in furthering the capacity for autonomy in language learning (Dörnyei, Henry & Muir, 2016; Murray, 2011). The aim of this paper is to examine this approach as one of the choices available to teachers and learners in relation to conducting assessment in a classroom-based language learning context. I will argue that such an approach to assessment recognises the need to engage the learner with the aim of affording opportunities for reflection on performance and progress, in both language use and perceived competence (Tassinari, 2012). It will be argued that this reflection fostered through peer- and self-assessment, encouraged the development of the capacity for autonomy and metacognitive awareness, within the confines and constraints of the university language learning classroom context described here.

This paper will begin with a brief overview of autonomy, followed by an examination of some of the ways it relates to assessment. Following this, the significance of reflection will be outlined in relation to self-assessment and autonomy, with an examination of the learning/teaching context, the assessment descriptors used, and some background to the focus underpinning this enquiry, also provided. This leads to an analysis of the outcomes of an end-of-term survey, where learners reported on their beliefs and reactions with regard to their experience with these alternative forms of assessment. The results of this survey are then discussed in light of the background and context outlined in the previous sections. Finally, the paper concludes with an evaluation of the undertaking and any concurrent implications connected to outcomes of the study, including the relationship binding self-assessment, autonomy and the development of metacognitive awareness.

Autonomy in Language Learning

Learner autonomy (LA) in language learning has undergone extensive research in an ever-widening array of contexts over the past several decades (Benson, 2011a; Lamb, 2017; Victori, 2000). However, the challenge of producing a one-size-fits-all definition has

apparently proven not only elusive, but also, perhaps, untenable. Definitions vary according to the strength or direction of focus that researchers place on particular aspects or manifestations of LA, due in part to the multidimensionality of the construct, and the wide range of contexts within which it is encouraged, exercised and observed (Benson, 2011b; Lamb, 2017). Nevertheless, Holec's (1981) core definition of LA expressed as "learners taking control of their learning" (p. 3), has remained a stable point of reference throughout these several decades of research and reflection, in relation to not only the theoretical and practical expression of autonomy, but also, significantly, to associated constructs, such as motivation and learning strategies (Benson, 2011b). As research and interest in LA continues, related ideas such as capacity building, personal autonomy, and autonomy as a socially oriented activity, are receiving (renewed) attention (Benson, 2011b).

For the purposes of this paper, LA in language learning is defined as learners exercising personal control and agency (Bandura, 2001; Ushioda, 2014), with a focus on autonomy as a capacity, enabled by willingness (Sinclair, 2008). This capacity is believed to be fostered, in part, through reflection (Cotterall, 2017; Everhard, 2015a) and driven by the desire (or motivation) to take action related to the achievement of improved competence, for example, when involved in the process of learning a second, or additional language (Cooker, 2015; Dam & Little, 1998; Oxford, 2017; Ushioda, 2014).

Assessment and Autonomy

The relationship between autonomy and assessment has been described as a challenging one (Everhard, 2015a, p. 34). As a construct recognized as both multidimensional and subject to variance, proponents of LA have been critical of attempts to align it within a framework conducive to summative assessment regimes (Benson, 2010; Benson, 2015). As Lamb (2017) argues, summative assessment is often viewed "as an instrument of control", and one which he suggests currently prevails as a dominant force over much of the present discourse in education (p. 181).

While autonomy in language learning, as previously mentioned, has been defined in a number of ways as it continues to be explored, it is difficult to find among these concordance concerning the concept of control *by others*. In contrast, Everhard (2015a) suggests that within the multiple strands of LA, we find dimensions more closely related to a learner-centred, or learner-controlled conceptualization, expressed through terms such as; "motivation, strategies, agency, identity, affect, self-esteem, self-direction, self-determination, self-regulation and self-efficacy" (p. 11), all of which suggest *self-control*, rather than the idea of

control *by others*. Thus, if assessment is to be related to autonomy in such a way as to provide for formative development, it seems reasonable to expect that it be done through establishing a relationship with the terms stated above, drawing upon the shared sense of self and will, to define its expression in practice (and theory).

Interest in the field of autonomy may currently be experiencing something of a renaissance, despite its decades-long development, and is arguably one of the concepts most frequently referred to in relation to language learning, advising, and teaching today (Benson, 2011b; 2007). In a recent review, Lamb (2017), traces its development from an initial construct based on the exercise of personal control over one's learning, to its current form as a mainstream phenomenon, found across virtually all areas of education, having moved on "to occupy a global space" (p. 182). However, with this expansion there also comes increased scrutiny with regard to its perceived appropriateness and applicability, including its place in relation to assessment.

In one relevant example, current theoretical models of LA have been questioned by Illés (2012), as to their practical relevance to today's rising challenges in the rapidly changing landscape of English language usage. Questions are raised concerning any implications inherent in the literature which may tempt the assumption that greater autonomy naturally leads to greater success in language use and performance. Relating this idea to a focus on assessment, the suggestion is made that the breaking down of the language learning process into discreet items to be self-assessed with simple can-do statements (found in many assessment descriptors and commercially published coursebooks) may, in fact, do a disservice to the learner. This is suggested to lie within the potential for can-do statements to encourage a false sense of security, in the face of the far more complex reality of cyclical and lifelong learning (Illés, 2012, p. 508).

In a similar vein, Díez-Bedmar (2017) draws attention to the can-do statements used in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), initially published in 2001, to aid learners and teachers of languages to foster self-evaluation and autonomy through reflection. She suggests that while, conceptually, their validity and usefulness may be beyond reproach, there is a need for these to be adapted and refined, to include additional focus on the *quality* of performance and production, through the loading of specific linguistic information culled from relevant corpora, which expand, rephrase and refocus the statements, thus better enabling learners to reflect and self-assess their abilities and needs as developing language users.

While there is a much wider ongoing discussion with regard to the relationship between assessment and autonomy (see Everhard & Murphy, 2015), these specific examples are brought to attention as they highlight a connection between the use of assessment descriptors for self-evaluation, with the aim of simultaneously bringing together opportunities for reflection to promote autonomy, and the development of communicative proficiency as an educational goal (Little, 2007).

As the examples above indicate, with increased visibility and a wider footprint across education, autonomy and its relationship to assessment continue to draw interest and fire debate. The question of whether and how autonomy should or can be assessed with any reliability, or purpose, is a complex issue and is currently an area of research being undertaken with renewed interest (Everhard & Murphy, 2015; Tassinari, 2012, RILAE LAB session, 2017).

However, it is worth bearing in mind, in this debate, that while it has become increasingly difficult to deny the importance and relevance of learner autonomy in language *learning*, for language *learners* the priority still tends to place improved and increased proficiency in the target language at the top of their goals, with time and effort spent on the development of greater autonomy of little interest, unless the two can be demonstrably reconciled (Little, 2007; Sinclair, 1999). It is of particular relevance then to aspire to accommodate assessment procedures with opportunities for the development of autonomy into mutually linked concepts, which support one another, and which aid in guiding the learner towards an explicit understanding and appreciation not only of his or her abilities and performance in the target language, but which also provide the opportunity to reflect on these in order to identify areas for improvement. (see Cooker, 2015; Ridley, 2003; Tassinari, 2015; Wilson, 2014).

Approaches to Assessment

It may be useful to briefly examine the broader area of assessment in language learning first, in order to appreciate the relevance of self-assessment and the use of descriptors for assessment purposes, within the context outlined in later sections. To this end, the two primary forms of assessment, as expressed through their aims and applicability, will briefly be examined in the following section.

Summative and formative assessment

Assessment in language learning, comes in different shapes and sizes. Summative assessment, common in institutions of (higher) learning and corporate regimes of assessment, focuses on the testing of discreet knowledge, often playing the role of gatekeeper in high stakes examinations (such as IELTS or TOEFL) and embodies an accumulative evaluation of learning for certification or grading purposes. Assessment of this kind, however, has been criticised as being detrimental to the development of LA (Benson, 2015). Whether due to its lack of engagement with the learner as a participant beyond that of recipient, or test-taker, there is, in addition, the tendency for summative assessment to encourage assessment-driven teaching, or what has been called ‘teaching to the test’, rather than that which aims to meet the formative needs and interests of the students involved (Benson, 2015; Everhard, 2015a). The numerical outcomes of this type of assessment normally take priority over all other factors and, as such, leave scarce room for the development or exercise of autonomy within what could (and *ought to*) be an opportunity for learning-centred teaching within a classroom teaching/learning context.

Formative assessment, or *assessment for learning* (Everhard, 2015a, p. 16), on the other hand, has been suggested to recognise the importance of utilising the space for growth engendered within the learning/teaching process, which allows for increased learner and teacher involvement. This approach to assessment is believed to foster opportunities for an increasingly holistic evaluation, which may include both peer- and self-assessment, via focused reflection and collaboration (Wilson, 2014). This assessment for learning, when managed with care and direction can lead to *assessment as learning*, or *assessment as autonomy*, viewed as a form of sustainable assessment, which involves “activities which generate feedback and the development of self-regulating and autonomous learners” (Everhard, 2015a, pp. 16-17, see also Cooker, 2015; Tassinari, 2015).

Formative assessment can take many forms, including continuous assessment, where the teacher (and/or learner) engages in consistent and regularly-occurring observation and reflection, informal feedback on task performance, classroom participation, homework, and out-of-class projects. Wilson (2014) points out that formative assessment is generally conceptualised as an approach that is “used to find out what students know and the areas where more help is needed, thereby informing future lessons” (p. 423). In addition, she argues that this is most effective when operationalized by the learners themselves, for instance, through sustained engagement in peer- and self-assessment (Clarke, 2008 cited in Wilson, 2014). Peer- and self-assessment, are seen as being crucial in supporting the development of

potentially transformative opportunities for self-regulated learning (SRL) (Kohonen, 2011; Wagner, 2011). As Wilson (2014) argues, when used as a classroom-based strategy which focuses on a given learning objective, self-assessment can aid in fostering the capacity for self-regulated learning, and have an impact on a person's approach to learning, and related behavior. It has been suggested that reflection plays a significant role in this transformation (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011a).

Reflection as Autonomy

Autonomy, in the literature of English Language Teaching (ELT), is often conceptualised as leading to an active, busy role for the learner. This activity may be envisioned and encouraged in a number of ways, including decision-making, time-management, goal-setting, collaboration, negotiation and/or communication, to name but a few (Illés, 2012). However, it seems reasonable to consider the need for quiet reflection and the development of self-awareness as equally important, and, some would argue, as being essential, for LA to flourish, re-energize, and to maintain a degree of sustainability (Everhard, 2015a; Lamb, 2017, Little, 1991). It is strongly argued that in the absence of reflection on learning, it is not possible for past learning experiences to remain accessible, which in turn may compromise plans for future action (Cotterall, 2017). In other words, much like the principle of noticing (Schmidt, 1995), the need for conscious attention and self-awareness in the form of reflection, including an opportunity to *voice* this experience, can be considered an essential ingredient for successful learning and the development of becoming autonomous to take place (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011b; Field, 2007).

Furthermore, in an exploration of ways in which *silence* is used by learners in the language learning classroom, Bao (2014) argues that the silent mind is often employed to reflect not only on language use and preparation for use, but also as a tool to reflect on performance and plan for future action.

One might argue that without a degree of reflection, silent or shared, autonomous action is virtually unattainable, beyond that which is linked to instinct or reflex. Thus, involvement in some form of reflection appears to foreground, and be necessary for both initial and continued efforts to exercise and develop the capacity for autonomy.

Following this line of reasoning, and in the absence of formal opportunities provided for this outside of the classroom, I set out to encourage reflection, directed towards the dual goals of enhanced language proficiency and sustainable autonomy (Sinclair, 1999) through peer- and self-assessment, focused on perceived competency and performance. The following

sections outline the context, and discuss the ways in which descriptors for assessment were used for self- and peer-assessment, through a process of reflection and response, in a university English language course in Japan.

The Context

The context, within which these descriptors were used will first be outlined in order to familiarize the reader with the participants and with the constraints involved in this enquiry and classroom-based intervention. First, the objectives of the language course on which the descriptors were used will be discussed, followed by an overview of the learners and a general description of their background. It is hoped that this contextualization will provide a clear backdrop so that the later discussion of peer- and self-assessment, as relates to the development of LA (in this context), can be more readily appreciated. The research questions guiding this enquiry focused on whether the participant learners would find it useful, as language learners, to take part in peer- and self-assessment, and if it was felt that they had learnt to take responsibility for their learning through this process. In addition, the research enquired into whether they felt that engaging in self-assessment and reflection would help them to be successful in other university courses they might take in the future.

The space, place and people

This enquiry was undertaken within the classrooms of a private university in Tokyo, Japan. The author taught on a number of language learning courses at this university, among which were four groups of first-year students with approximately 20 learners in each. These classes were obligatory for all first-year students at this institution, and a minimum of 80% attendance was required in order to be eligible to receive credit for these courses. The groups met four days a week for a 50-minute class hour. In addition, all of the groups attended a fifth day of class, with a Japanese national as their teacher of English, dedicated primarily to reading, translation and vocabulary enrichment. The students were primarily aged between 18-19, with the exception of a minority of international students who varied in age, but were mainly in their early twenties. This meant that at the start of the year, the only prior experience of English language learning, for the majority, had been the six years of instruction they had received in their lower secondary and high school classes in Japan. The quality and diversity of this experience would clearly vary; however, English language classes in this context have been described as unsupportive of learner autonomy, or of promoting communication skills, as these classes are usually focused on exam preparation, with the

methods and goals of teaching and learning English unaligned with an actively participative approach (King, 2013, p.70).

The majority of the students in these groups were Japanese nationals, with international students from China and Taiwan making up less than 2 % of the total. These students were grouped according to their department and undergraduate major course of study, which included Law, Economics, Business and Multicultural Studies. As these classes were obligatory, not all students demonstrated the same level of enthusiasm or motivation to participate or attend the classes. While not entirely homogeneous with regard to level of competence, the students were assigned a coursebook at the B1 (CEFR) level of competency (approximately pre-intermediate level), as per the regulations of the university department in charge of the administration of these classes. However, as their teacher I enjoyed a relative amount of flexibility in choosing how these courses might be supplemented, organised, and assessed, so that the more immediate needs and interests of the students could be more effectively met.

The objectives of the course were not only to develop confidence and competence in English as a foreign language, but were more specifically aimed at the improvement of communication skills, including an understanding of basic pragmatics, and the development of inter-cultural awareness, as related to language use and meaning. Harumi (2011) underscores the simultaneously challenging and necessary commitment of setting and striving for such goals in a Japanese language learning context. The promotion of LA to enable their capacity for lifelong learning, and to exercise this within the context of the classroom lessons, were also key aims since for many this could likely be the last English language course they would attend while pursuing their university education. However, as mentioned briefly above, most, if not all, of these learners lacked prior opportunities to exercise autonomy, or to use English in any sort of communicative manner that would help them meet the demands and requirements of this specific English language course (Miyahara, 2015, p. 6).

Self- and peer-assessment

Introducing self-assessment as a way to engage learners more fully in their learning experience has been accepted and acknowledged as an effective tool to facilitate reflection (Everhard & Murphy, 2015; Little, 2007). Reflection has been described as “a key element which binds assessment and autonomy” (Everhard, 2015a, p. 30). Peer-assessment, in turn, has been seen as effective in preparation for and as a platform from which the skills to more

successfully engage in later self-reflection can be developed (Everhard, 2015b; Little & Perclová, 2001).

In the classroom context described in the previous section, assessment descriptors (see Appendix A) were used to engage learners in peer- and self-assessment, and there were additional opportunities for this to occur in a more informal and task-specific sense during the course of study, and between the times in which the descriptors were formally used. These included peer- and self-assessment on speaking tasks (a long turn), general performance in a given class period, and project work feedback in the form of peer-evaluation of a presentation. Further opportunities for self-assessment included reflection on progress involving identified learning goals, and language retention through the use of self-checks.

Assessment Descriptors for Peer- and Self-Assessment

The descriptors used for the purposes of peer- and self-assessment were developed over a period of several years, with the input of colleagues at different points in time, and in different, culturally diverse, teaching/learning contexts. The ones used here were modified slightly to better reflect the classroom-based learner activity which had been observed in the previous semester when I had taught similar classes. The areas of focus the learners were directed to reflect on represent the two principal areas which were used for formal assessment of semester-long performance, and to assign a letter grade to the students at the end of each term. The two broad areas are communication and participation, as these were felt to reflect the basis of the desired learning outcomes from involvement in the class as an active and contributing member of the learning environment. Communication here refers to both speaking and writing, although the main focus of the classroom activities was normally weighted towards oral production and communication, rather than written work. Participation covers the broad area of classroom lesson involvement and engagement, including aspects of pair and group work, homework, and out-of-class project work.

Each descriptor (see Appendix A) includes five performance-based descriptions of a broad range of actions and competence, representative of a language learner at various stages of continuous performance within the context of the language learning classroom. These were written to encompass a range of learner profile types through a focus on what a learner *does* in the classroom, in relation to communication and participation. One of the elements which is used to differentiate between these is that of consistency, and to what level of competence these actions are performed. This focus on consistency is marked by the use of specific adverbs which describe the regularity of observable or non-observable behaviour. This was

preferred to the more typical ‘can do’ statements often found in assessment descriptors, as mentioned previously in the autonomy and assessment section. The principal reason for this preference was that as the descriptors were meant as tools for reflection and *continuous* assessment, it was felt that consistency would be a key indicator for sustainable progress and achievement.

The different levels and point spreads (see descriptors) represent the incremental advancement towards attainment of what I came to consider as acceptable levels of performance, in accordance with the aims set out in the course overview provided at the outset of the course. The point spreads (from 0-25 points) represent a range of applicability of each of the actions and competencies described incrementally, to be aligned with the learners’ own perception of classroom performance. In addition, these point spreads are also attached to a letter grading scheme (not shown here) which is needed to fulfil the requirements of the university grading system. While the ideas underpinning the construction of these descriptors were clearly influenced and inspired by the rubric-based descriptors of examinations such as IELTS, or the University of Cambridge main-suite oral exam descriptors, these are products of my personal experience as a TESOL practitioner, and my attempt to reflect in an objective, direct and specific manner my own ideas for optimal attainment in the areas of communication and participation for a General English course of this kind. As these courses aim to inspire and develop the learners’ capacity for autonomous action, as well as improved language competence, the wording of the different levels of the descriptors makes every attempt to reflect that aim, in a global, but specifically expressed description. It is clearly not possible, or desirable that a learner’s actions perfectly mirror the language in the various descriptions, and they are encouraged to think of them as somewhat fluid. When peer- or self-assessment is conducted with these, after careful reading of the descriptions, the learners reflect on their own continuous performance, and choose a quantity of points which reflects either a higher or lower end of each descriptor spread, or a representative mix of the two most closely related to (their perception of) their performance and competence. The descriptors are written in the target language (TL), as this reflects how the classes are taught (using the students’ L2). This use of the TL is done purposefully. Ellis (2009) argues for the preference of the TL for classroom communication, as one of the principled components of a classroom-based approach to fostering autonomous learning (p. 224). Learners are encouraged to help one another to reach an understanding of the language used, or elicit examples from the teacher, if needed.

Descriptors in use

Shortly after the beginning of the course, in the first semester of the year, the descriptors were introduced at the same time as the course objectives and grading system were communicated to the classes. The learners were later asked to read them through and decide which section described them best as a learner at that point, approximately one week into the course. They were also asked to think of ways they could act and actions they might take in future, in order to better match one of the descriptions of higher value. These were discussed in small groups and elicited and commented on in class. The students were informed that they would review the descriptors again to conduct peer- and self-assessment, at the mid-point of the course.

At the mid-semester they were asked to assess themselves (and a classmate), and provide anecdotal evidence to support the points (reflecting the description that best matched their perceptions) recording this in the relevant section of the handout (see Appendix B). These were collected, commented on, and returned to the students. Following this, the class was led in an activity whose purpose was to generate a personal learning goal (see Appendix C), related to English and themselves (though not necessarily related to classroom performance). The task included identification of the goal, the reasons for its importance, actions that could be initiated to work towards goal achievement, and any problems they might encounter along the way, including possible ways to solve these (Arnold, Dörnyei & Pugliese, 2015, p. 23). Setting and striving towards personal goals has been linked to fostering vision and related autonomous action (Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016, p. 48), and when used to follow on from self-assessment can provide further opportunities for reflection when reviewing these goals at a later date.

At the end of the semester, they were given a final opportunity to use the descriptors to engage in peer- and self-assessment. It was at this time that they were asked to conduct both peer- and self-assessment of semester-long performance and progress, providing written anecdotal evidence to support this. The peer-assessment was conducted in pairs, with the students reading out their descriptions from the assessment descriptor sheet to one another, as well as any anecdotal evidence they had recorded in support of this. This was of a confidential nature, between the two learners. However, they were encouraged to reflect on this as compared to their own self-assessment (which had been conducted first, on this final occasion). The handouts on which their self-assessments and anecdotal evidence were recorded were collected and taken into account when final grades for these two areas were awarded. This was determined by reviewing notes, observations, and the results of any

assessed classwork or homework, including in-class presentations and out-of-class project work. While peer-assessment had been introduced and performed at various points, and for a variety of reasons throughout the lessons, in this final evaluation it was felt that asking students to reflect on a peer-review after having conducted a self-evaluation, might add further depth to the reflective process.

When involved at this level of introspection, attempting to reason and objectively evaluate themselves by providing concrete evidence, while contrasting this with the models of the descriptors, students are being asked to exercise a level of reflection which helps them to question and reframe past actions and outcomes, potentially leading to the cultivation of competencies and perceptions of personal efficacy (Bandura, 2009). While initially it can often prove difficult for these students to critically assess themselves as language learners, with time, repetition, and the encouragement of offering/receiving feedback, they were considerably more confident and comfortable with this by the end of the semester. Initial difficulties can be due to inexperience and a lack of metacognitive awareness to enable a view of themselves as learners. However, with practice and after having opportunities to engage in peer-assessment, the majority of these learners showed less reluctance. Peer-assessment allowed the learners to remove the focus from themselves, but apply the same criteria to a known classmate. Everhard (2015b) points out that engaging in peer-assessment has a number of personal benefits for the learner, and among them it can “develop the necessary objectivity required for satisfactory self-assessment” (p. 116). Peer-assessment is generally recognised as a useful precursor to self-assessment which can aid in the development of the objectivity and metacognitive skills needed for successful self-assessment (Everhard, 2015b), despite the challenges that it can present initially.

One of these challenges can often be the development of an awareness of what a person, in fact, actually does, and the extent to which this is done with success. However, in the context I have described, honesty was not normally an issue, since Japanese students, in my experience, can often be harder on themselves than I may be as their teacher. This may be due to cultural reasons. For example, modesty is prized as a personal attribute by many in Japanese culture, and it is not generally considered appropriate to speak of oneself in a way which may be interpreted as boasting or bragging. However, when assessing a peer, it can be difficult to be honest about how well the other person may have done on a particular task, or in regards to their day-to-day performance, for a number of different reasons. One of them can be a desire to please the other, or a level of immaturity that may lead to silliness, instead of useful comments and questions. Another reason can be a feeling of inadequacy, or a lack of

authorisation to pass judgement on another person who shares their same situation. In my observations, Japanese learners often refrain from directly expressing their opinions when it involves making a judgement. This is particularly true when this opinion might diverge from accepted or agreed-upon norms (Harumi, 2011). Thus, saving face can involve protecting a classmate from being confronted with a less than favourable assessment, and can lead the partner or group member to become involved in “friendship marking” (Falchikov, 2005, p. 205) to avoid a disagreeable moment, which could either upset the harmony between them or the ambience in the classroom overall (Bao, 2014).

Nevertheless, with carefully structured opportunities, and by modelling/teaching the use of vague language and modal verbs, to soften any criticism, peer-assessment may in fact become the more enjoyable and instructive of the two. This can be done in different ways, such as assuming/assigning different roles to the learners. For example, one of the students can take the role of a particular person (family member, teacher, less/more experienced learner) and provide an assessment from that person’s point of view (see Kato & Mynard, 2015, p. 46). This can widen perspectives, and lighten up the classroom atmosphere, while ensuring that learners are focused on the evaluation.

In order to optimise engagement in both peer- and self-assessment, it is important that justification be encouraged through providing examples, reasons and reasoning to support any assessment proffered. Importantly, when introducing this for the first time, it is useful to offer explicit modelling of how this can be performed, including the highlighting of specific language forms and formulae that can be helpful to frame ideas and encourage a fair, and not overly judgemental, assessment. Modelling interaction and language for such an activity appeared to be helpful when the learners were asked to conduct peer-assessment, and self-assess their performance and competency at the end of the semester.

Learner Reflection and Feedback

Data analysis

At the end of the semester the learners across the four groups (n=75) were invited to complete a self-evaluation questionnaire in which they were asked to reflect on their experiences in class over the semester, and to evaluate different aspects of the course (Appendix D). Among the questions included were three which asked them to reflect on their overall experience with peer- and self-assessment, and report on their perception of its usefulness to them as language learners, including the extent to which they felt they had learnt to take responsibility for their own learning, and whether they could say if they believed

learning to self-assess and engage in reflection would help them to be successful on other university courses they might take in the future (see Appendix D questions 2, 6 & 11).

Responses to the questions specific to self-assessment were tabulated to gain understanding and insight into the perceptions of the learners, with regard to their experience with this alternative type of assessment. Likert-scales representative of six levels of agreement were used to measure the learners' response, which are recorded below as a mean average (n=75) %. The results are shown below in Tables 1 – 3.

Table 1. *Taking part in peer- and self-assessment has been useful for me as a language learner. (n=75) %*

Yes, always	I think this is true most of the time	I think this is true a lot of the time	I think this is true only some of the time	Not very much	No, never
14.7	45.3	33.3	6.7	0	0

Table 2. *I have learned to take responsibility for my own learning. (n=75) %*

Yes, always	I think this is true most of the time	I think this is true a lot of the time	I think this is true only some of the time	Not very much	No, never
4	32	49.3	13.3	1.3	0

Table 3. *I think that learning to self-assess and reflect on my progress will help me to be successful on other university courses I will take in the future. (n=75) %*

Yes, always	I think this is true most of the time	I think this is true a lot of the time	I think this is true only some of the time	Not very much	No, never
21.3	32	36	8	2.7	0

Discussion and Implications

Clearly, the collective response to the first question is encouraging. With over three quarters of those surveyed indicating that, as language learners, participation in peer- and self-assessment was perceived as a useful activity most of the time, or a lot of the time. This can be interpreted as a clear example of these language learners executing a degree of metacognitive awareness, as a certain level of reflection upon themselves, and the activity of peer- and self-assessment, was required in order to express this opinion.

When taking responses to the second question into consideration, the idea that peer- and self-assessment was found to be useful can be linked to an extension of this development of further awareness, in that taking responsibility for their own learning was not only acknowledged as something they had learnt how to do, but also something worthwhile and useful. In my continued observations of in-class behaviour, in addition to student feedback on in-class activities and out-of-class project work in the semester following this report, it was noted that several students across the different groups had become more active in pair and group discussions, and whole class activities. Through this they began to demonstrate not only a more confident approach to using English, but also, very importantly, a greater willingness and awareness of how their personal contribution impacted on the success and intrinsic enjoyment of the tasks they had engaged in.

The third question relates directly to the goal stated earlier of building on the capacity for autonomous learning beyond this course, within the wider area of life-long learning. Significantly, nearly a quarter responded in the affirmative (yes, always) to the question of whether they believed that having been involved in learning how to self-assess and reflect on their progress would have a positive impact on their efforts to succeed on future university courses they will be involved in. This was followed by more than half who believed this to be true, most, or a lot, of the time (a total of nearly 90% responding affirmatively). This is a significant response, and one which relates to vision (Dörnyei, 2014), leaving little doubt as to the impact that participation in peer- and self-assessment had on their belief systems, and metacognitive view of how personal success can be directly linked to introspection, and reflection on their behaviours and competencies, as they continue to develop and change.

Conclusion

This study examined the procedures, tools and outcomes of an enquiry into the effectiveness and appropriacy of introducing peer- and self-assessment into the fabric of the course structure of an English as a foreign language course for first-year students, conducted at a private university in Japan.

The aims of this intervention were not only to enact a deeper involvement and personal commitment from the learners in these classes, but also to raise awareness of how reflection and response can aid in developing a clearer understanding of their competencies and the capacity to build on these, while exercising autonomy and metacognition to kindle the spark of continued self-directed learning and vision.

From the responses given, which bear on the impact these opportunities may have afforded, it clearly seems reasonable to suggest that the learners involved in this study did indeed take away positive insights into the effectiveness and usefulness of learning to self-assess their own progress, competencies and approaches to classroom and out-of-class learning. The use of the assessment descriptors, linked to the goals of the language course, the consistency of their deployment and related development of the students as learners, appear to have been instrumental in aiding the majority of these learners to both peer- and self-assess their actions and abilities and, consequently, in creating a vision of the usefulness of reflection as a metacognitive regulator in future learning contexts.

Autonomy, as an expression of will, may not lend itself easily to objective assessment by others, outside of the self. However, if an awareness of its potential can be raised and exercised within the constraints and affordances of a formative approach to assessment, both learning and evaluation can be more closely aligned, opening up opportunities for autonomous action initiated through reflection, which can impact on beliefs of self-efficacy, progress, and future learning opportunities.

Notes on the contributor

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Appendices

Appendix A: Part A Assessment descriptor for: Participation (Student version)

25 (100%)	20 (80%)	17.5 (70%)	15 (60%)	-14 (below 60%)
<p>You take part fully in all tasks and activities, often making contributions without being asked to.</p> <p>You consistently work well in collaboration with others and often listen and invite others to participate, as well as offering ideas of your own.</p> <p>You regularly attend class (punctually). There is evidence that your classwork and homework have been completed with care.</p> <p>You show respect to your classmates and teacher.</p>	<p>You take part in classroom tasks and activities, responding actively to other students and teacher-led presentations.</p> <p>You regularly participate in pair and group work and sometimes add ideas without being asked.</p> <p>You regularly attend class (punctually) with homework completed.</p> <p>You behave appropriately at all times in class.</p>	<p>You take part in all classroom tasks and activities. You participate and offer responses to fulfil task aims, but this is not always consistent.</p> <p>You respond to teacher-led, pair and group work, but occasionally can be distracted or need to be reminded to take part more fully.</p> <p>You <u>attempt</u> to complete class and homework although not always with success.</p> <p>You attend the majority of classes and generally behave appropriately.</p>	<p>You only occasionally participate in class and work on tasks that need your collaboration.</p> <p>You often need to be asked to work together with classmates and can be inconsistent when you do.</p> <p>You can be easily distracted from your work.</p> <p>and/or</p> <p><i>You have missed several classes and/or regularly arrive late.</i></p> <p>Your behaviour is not always appropriate in class.</p>	<p>You very rarely participate in class and are often unwilling to work with others. You do not generally respond to invitations by the teacher to get involved.</p> <p>and/or</p> <p><i>You have missed a large number of classes and/or arrive late consistently.</i></p> <p>Your behaviour can be a problem and you do not respond when you are asked to change this.</p> <p>You generally lack enthusiasm and do not often seem to be interested in learning.</p>

Appendix A: Part B
Assessment descriptor for: Communication (Student version)

25 (100%)	20 (80%)	17.5 (70%)	15 (60%)	-14 (below 60%)
<p>You communicate easily, accurately, and with confidence at this level.</p> <p>You regularly use a wide range of language (for your level), making few errors. You successfully use new language you have learned.</p> <p>Your speech (and written work) is clear, fluent and easy to understand.</p> <p>You consistently use English in class. You can explain what you want to say using other words if needed, and in this way avoid using your first language to communicate meaning.</p>	<p>You can make your meaning clear <i>with few problems</i> at this level.</p> <p>You often use an appropriate range of language (for your level), though with occasional errors. You use new language from the course with some success.</p> <p>Your speech (and written work) is quite clear and you can usually be understood with little problem.</p> <p>You almost always use English to communicate in class and can usually explain what you mean in other words to avoid using your first language to express your meaning.</p>	<p>You are generally able to make your meaning clear but with <i>some</i> breakdowns in communication.</p> <p>You use appropriate language (well for this level), but with quite a lot of errors. You use new language learned from the lessons but not always correctly or in a natural way.</p> <p>Others can usually understand what you say but poor pronunciation or intonation (and/or poor control and organisation in written expression) sometimes causes difficulties for the listener.</p> <p>You use a mix of L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English) in class and explaining what you mean in other words is not always clear.</p>	<p>You are able to communicate basic meaning for this level, but because of poor fluency and/or too many errors, <i>communication breaks down quite often</i>.</p> <p>You usually depend on language you already know and have a basic range of grammar and vocabulary for this level. New language from the course is not often used.</p> <p>Poor pronunciation and/or intonation (and/or poor control and organisation in written expression) can often cause problems in communication.</p> <p>You use L1 (Japanese) in class much too often and cannot usually make your meaning clear in L2 (English).</p>	<p>You are able to communicate very basic meaning at this level, but very poor fluency and/or accuracy makes <i>effective communication</i> very difficult.</p> <p>You almost always use language you already know and/or very basic language, and you use a very limited selection of grammar and vocabulary for this level. New language from the course is not generally used.</p> <p>Pronunciation, language use and expression are generally poor and this regularly causes difficulty for the listener (or reader).</p> <p>You depend mostly on L1 (Japanese) in class and cannot or will not try to paraphrase.</p>

Appendix B
Student self-assessment sheet

Read a description of what a student is expected to be able to do in this class on the Student descriptors you have been given. These descriptors are used to evaluate your abilities and *progress* in this class. They will be used to help me award you a letter grade at the end of the semester.

Reflecting on your performance (communication and participation) in this class so far, decide which description describes you best as a student in this class. Write in the number of points you believe you deserve, and which reflect you as a learner.

You should include a short note to provide evidence of this below in the space provided. *(See an example at the bottom of the page). By providing evidence you are supporting your assessment.

Areas of Assessment	25 (100%)	20 (80%)	17.5 (70 %)	15 (60%)	-14 (below 60%)
Participation					
Communication					

Evidence of <u>participation</u> points	Evidence of <u>communication</u> points

Example

Points	25 (100%)	20 (80%)	17.5 (70 %)	15 (60%)	-14 (below 60%)
Participation			17		

Evidence of <u>participation</u> points
<i>I come to class (almost) every day and try hard to complete the tasks in class and work together with my classmates well. Sometimes I daydream a little or come to class a bit sleepy but I <u>do</u> try. I know I need to ask more questions and be more active and I'm going to start changing that! Sometimes I forget to do my homework too. I do my work in class but sometimes I'm too slow because I don't understand. I have learned a lot of new words and my confidence in speaking English is way up from the beginning. I think my project work was good too. It was hard but in the end it was fun.</i>

Appendix C
Personal learning goal sheet

Success depends on action – action leads to momentum – momentum keeps you going
Goal + effort = success

Write down many reasons why you think English could be useful for you in your future.
(Think about what you like to do, or would like to do in the future, and how English can help)

English could be useful for me in the future...

To help me get a job

Now, think of **one** GOAL you have connected to learning English. e.g. understanding songs in English, or to be able to talk with people when they come for the Tokyo Olympics.

e.g. *I want to speak English more fluently. I want to be able to speak more smoothly.*

1.

Answer the questions below. Then ask (and tell) a partner about this goal.

What is your goal? e.g. <i>I want to have more fluency.</i>	
Why is it important for you? <i>Because it's not helpful when I take a long time to answer a question or say something.</i>	
What things can you do to help you reach this goal? <i>Push myself in class activities. Practice shadowing and singing songs in English.</i>	
What is (at least) one problem you might have and how could you solve it? <i>I might get unmotivated. But, I could get a friend to practice with and do it together.</i>	

Adapted from: Arnold, Dörnyei & Pugliese, 2015, p. 23

Appendix D
Student self-assessment and course feedback

Think about your experience in class with your teacher and classmates.
Read the statements below and circle a number 1-6 to reflect your feelings.

1 = No, never 2 = Not very often 3 = I think this is true only some of the time
4 = I think this is true a lot of the time 5 = I think this is true most of the time 6 = Yes, always

1. The lesson content has been interesting, useful and meets my needs as a user of English.

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. **Taking part in peer and self-assessment has been useful for me as a language learner.**

1 2 3 4 5 6

3. I have received constructive feedback on my progress.

1 2 3 4 5 6

4. I could understand what my teacher says in the lessons quite easily.

1 2 3 4 5 6

5. The lesson materials (texts, videos, etc.) have been too difficult for me.

1 2 3 4 5 6

6. **I have learnt to take responsibility for my own learning.**

1 2 3 4 5 6

7. It was explained clearly to me what I needed to do to pass this course.

1 2 3 4 5 6

8. I believe I have been successful in this course because I have worked hard.

1 2 3 4 5 6

9. I feel my speaking fluency has improved as a result of my class work.

1 2 3 4 5 6

10. I believe I have improved in all my English skills on this course.

1 2 3 4 5 6

11. **I think that learning to self-assess and reflect on my progress will help me to be successful on other university courses I will take in the future.**

1 2 3 4 5 6

When you have finished, make any further notes below in regards to your classes.