

Autonomy 2000 Conference Report / 大会報告

Autonomy 2000 (an international conference on the development of learning independence in language learning) was held at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Thonburi in Thailand from Nov.20 to 22, 1996. Here is a conference report written by Richard Smith.

From Asian views of autonomy to revised views of Asia: Beyond Autonomy 2000

Richard C. Smith
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Background : The "autonomy in Asia" debate

Recently there has been a lively debate regarding the appropriacy of autonomous learning as an educational goal in non-western, and, specifically, Asian contexts (cf. Farmer, 1994; Aoki, 1994; Jones, 1995; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Pierson, 1996; Aoki and Smith, 1996; and Little, 1996b; also, a number of papers at the November, 1996 Autonomy 2000 Conference at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, Thailand, discussed further below).

Here are some of the doubts which have been raised (emphases added) :

- 1) "...concepts of autonomy and individual responsibility and freedom, as they figure in social as well as educational contexts, come laden with Western values." (Jones, 1995: 229).
- 2) "To make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity." (ibid.: 229). "(Hong Kong Chinese students are) from a cultural background that is almost diametrically opposed to autonomy." (Ho & Crookall, 1995: 240).
- 3) "This characterization of the Cambodian learner as dependent and authority-oriented does not seem to be a promising basis for development of self-access and autonomy" (Jones, 1995: 229); "It is easy to see why Chinese students would not find autonomy very comfortable." (Ho & Crookall, 1995: 237).
- 4) "...no matter what guise autonomy may take, it remains a Western idea, and may come upon the traditions and conventions of Cambodian education

with the force of ideological imposition, promoting a type of behaviour that conflicts with the national culture at a deep level." (Jones, 1995: 230).

At the same time a number of counter-arguments supporting the view that development of learner autonomy can be appropriate in Asian contexts have also been made, and might be summarized as follows (emphases added) :

5) There are forms of autonomy within "traditional" Asian cultures (Aoki, 1994; Pierson, 1996).

6) "If the potential for autonomy is a human universal and the purpose of education is to help learners to develop tools for critical reflection, it follows as a matter of principle that learner autonomy is an appropriate pedagogical goal in all cultural settings. (But) it must grow, quasi-organically, out of the ongoing encounter between the critical goals of the educational enterprise and the particularities of cultural context." (Little, 1996b).

7) There may be a prevalent misconception that autonomy is equivalent to individualism. Autonomy entails interdependence as well as independence, indeed group-orientedness may be a strength in developing autonomy, no less than individualism may be. (Aoki and Smith, 1996; cf. also Aoki, 1994, and Benson, 1995).

8) It has been reported that learners readily engage in collaborative group work arrangements intended to foster learner autonomy. in various Asian contexts (cf. Farmer, 1994, Ho & Crookall, 1995, Aoki, 1995).

9) Arguments against the aspirations of people can easily be hidden within arguments against cultural imperialism (cf. the discourse on "human rights"). (Aoki and Smith, 1996).

10) Cultures are not necessarily co-equal with "nations," nor are cultures static; we should be careful not to limit students' potential through cultural stereotyping. (Aoki and Smith, 1996).

11) Educational arrangements rather than "national culture" may play the determining role in (re)producing passive attitudes towards classroom learning. (Pierson, 1996: 55; Aoki & Smith, 1996).

Autonomy 2000 : Asian views of autonomy

Several papers at the Autonomy 2000 conference lent further weight to the above arguments in favour of the validity of autonomy as an educational goal in various Asian contexts. Thus, Krissanapong (1996), on the first day of the conference, argued that - ironically, perhaps - it was the introduction of "western-style (formal) learning" which caused a decline in traditional forms of autonomous learning in Thailand. However, "formal learning has become oppressive," with students being "spoon-fed, to regurgitate at exam time from texts," and Krissanapong suggested that it is now important to "rediscover" autonomy in the traditions of Thai rural contexts.

At the same time, two Hong Kong-based presenters, Benson and Littlewood, emphasized (in separate papers) that autonomy does not need to be conceived of as excluding values such as collaboration and interdependence, and that social conceptions of autonomy may be particularly required in Asian contexts. In this connection, both Benson and Littlewood lent weight to the view that autonomy - appropriately defined - does have the potential to be seen as a universal educational goal, and they both referred with some approval to Little's (e.g. 1996a) universalist position which emphasizes the inevitably social nature of autonomy in language learning. As Benson argued perceptively, "the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue is opened up by the rupture of the link between universalism and individualism offered in a version of autonomy that is simultaneously universal and collectivist." As my own paper was also intended to suggest, Asia-derived emphases on more social, less individualistic versions of autonomy might thus be seen as catalysts in an ongoing revision of over-individualistic, "universal" conceptions of autonomy. This would include those presented - with undue pessimism, it may now appear - as involving "limits on independence" (Farmer 1994), a "retreat" from autonomy (Jones 1995) or a possible "break" with local traditions (Ho & Crookall 1995).

Benson showed additionally in his paper how the debate over the cross-cultural appropriacy of autonomy as an educational goal parallels - and can draw inspiration from - the debate at a more self-evidently political level over the universal validity of Western-inspired notions of human rights, and touched in this context on argument 9 above. At the

same time, a number of contributors (e.g. Littlewood 1996; Robbins 1996; and Smith 1996) added their support to the claim that learners in different Asian contexts may - in practice, not only in theory - respond well to collaborative, group-based arrangements for the fostering of learner autonomy.

Beyond Autonomy 2000 : towards revised views of "Asia"

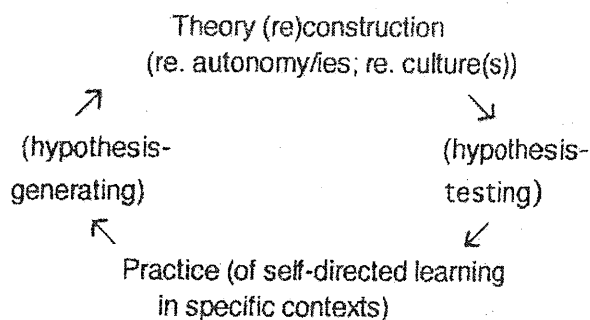
At Autonomy 2000, then, there was a large degree of support for the position that appropriately revised conceptions of autonomy can be valid in Asian contexts. However, with attention focused on the need for "Asian" (or, in more universal terms, "social") views of autonomy, the notion of "Asia" itself came in for relatively little critical scrutiny, and some important questions remain to be investigated in this area. For example, when we talk about "Asian" contributions to the revision of universal notions, or propensities of "Asian" learners, what do we mean exactly? How can we ("outsider" or "insider" teachers/researchers) say with confidence that students in particular Asian contexts are, for example, relatively group-oriented, and therefore, perhaps, tend to respond well to collaborative, interdependent arrangements for development of autonomous learning, as is being suggested more and more frequently? Is there not a danger here of replacing negative stereotypes relating to learners in Asian countries (e.g. that they are "dependent and authority-oriented" (Jones, 1995 : 225)) with positive, but no less stereotypical characterizations of their supposed interdependence and ability to work independently of teachers, in groups?

Similarly, in generalizing about propensities towards autonomy in students' cultural backgrounds, are we not at risk of replacing one polemical position (that these backgrounds may be "diametrically opposed to autonomy" (cf. Ho & Crookall, 1995: 240)) with another (that they are unproblematically supportive of (revised conceptions of) autonomy)? As Benson suggested in his paper, it may be necessary not only to problematize the notion of autonomy itself but also that of "culture" if we are to move beyond over-simplistic, rhetorical distinctions such as that between "the West" and "Asia" (viewed as monolithic entities), and closer to appropriate characterizations of and arrangements for our own students in various Asian contexts.

In this connection, relevant sources of empirical data might appear to include cross-cultural learning style surveys such as those summarized by Oxford and Anderson (1995), or more wide-ranging investigations of "cultural propensities" such as those by Hofstede (e.g. 1983), the latter having been frequently referred to at the Autonomy 2000 conference in the service of generalizations about "Asian learners." Such surveys potentially have the merit of differentiating to some extent between particular Asian contexts, but - even if used to this purpose - they may tend to be based on over-simplified and over-generalized views of learners' "cultures." In other words, they tend to equate cultures with nations, ignoring the various other forms of culture (e.g. class, religious, gender-related, generational or institutional) in which individual learners participate (cf. arguments 10 and 11 above and Holliday, 1994:21); in addition, such surveys may tend to present cultures as static determinants of learner behaviour rather than as "dynamic systems subject to change through internal and external dialogue" (Benson, 1996; cf., also, Pennycook, 1997).

Acknowledging these kinds of concern, Littlewood suggested at the Autonomy 2000 conference that, rather than taking survey research results at face value, we use them as a basis for hypotheses, or "predictions" about Asian learners, but that we then need to test these hypotheses against the realities of individual students in particular contexts and their reactions to particular arrangements for autonomous learning. Given the limitations of survey research indicated above, I would like to suggest here that an alternative, though complementary approach to development of theories of autonomy in cultural context might be more bottom-up, ethnographic and generative of hypotheses, with theory deriving in the first instance from reports of self-directed language learning as engaged in by particular (groups of) Asian learners, as opposed to more generalized stereotypes or survey results. The complementary nature of these approaches to theory (re)construction is illustrated in the following diagram, with a hypothesis-testing approach taking up the right hand side of the diagram, and a more ethnographic, hypothesis-generating approach pictured on the left :

Approaches to the development of theory of autonomy in cultural context



It seems to me after attending the Autonomy 2000 conference that by engaging in and thoroughly describing / evaluating particular approaches to development of autonomous learning with their own students, teacher-researchers with experience in Asian contexts have an important contribution to make, from the bottom up, to theorizing about autonomy/ies and learners' culture(s) in Asia. With revised, more social and apparently appropriate conceptions of autonomy provisionally "under our belts", it may now be time to move the debate about generalization and into the empirical--for example, the ethnographic investigation of learners and their capacities for autonomy, in various Asian contexts.

"autonomy in Asia" beyond polemical

Acknowledgements

A shorter version of this article was included in the first issue of the newsletter of the AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy. Many thanks to Andy Barfield, Bill Savage and Peter Voller for their helpful comments on the first draft.

References

(corrected type!)

Aoki, N. (1994). "Autonomy in Asia." *Learning Learning*, 1/4, 9-12. (Also in *Independence* 12, 4-6.)

Aoki, N. (1995). "Empowering future teachers: A humanistic approach to developing learner autonomy." A report submitted for the fifth Nordic Workshop on Developing Autonomous Learning, Copenhagen.

Aoki, N. and Smith, R.C. (1996). "Autonomy in cultural context: The case of Japan." Paper read at AILA 96, Finland, during Symposium on "Implementing Learner Autonomy."

Benson, P. (1995). "Self-access and collaborative learning." *Independence*, 12, 6-11.

- Benson, P. (1996). "The multiple meanings of autonomy in language learning." Paper read at Autonomy 2000, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, Thailand.
- Farmer, R. (1994). "The limits of learner independence in Hong Kong." In D. Gardner & L. Miller (eds.). *Directions in Self-Access Language Learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 13-27.
- Ho, J. & Crookall, D. (1995). "Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: Learner autonomy in English language teaching." *System* 23/2, 235-243.
- Hofstede, G. (1983). "The cultural relativity of organizational practices and theories." *Journal of International Business Studies*, Fall 1983, 75-89.
- Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, J. (1995). "Self-access and culture: Retreating from autonomy." *ELT Journal* 49/3, 228-234.
- Krissanapong K. (1996). "Autonomy rediscovered." Paper read at Autonomy 2000, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, Thailand.
- Little, D. (1996a). "Freedom to learn and compulsion to interact: promoting learner autonomy through the use of information systems and information technologies" In R. Pemberton et.al. (eds.). *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 203-18
- Little, D. (1996b). "Learner autonomy is more than a cultural construct." Paper read at AILA 96, Finland, during Symposium on "Implementing Learner Autonomy."
- Littlewood, W. (1996). "Autonomy in communication and learning in the Asian context." Paper read at Autonomy 2000, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, Thailand.
- Oxford, R. L. and N.J. Anderson. (1995). "A crosscultural view of learning styles". *Language Teaching* 28, 201-215.
- Pennycook, A. (1997). "Cultural alternatives and autonomy." In P. Benson & P. Voller (eds.). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman, pp. 35-53.
- Pierson, H. (1996). "Learner culture and learner autonomy in the Hong Kong Chinese context." In R. Pemberton et.al. (eds.). *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp.49-58.
- Robbins, J. (1996). "Language learning strategies instruction in Asia: Cooperative autonomy." Paper read at Autonomy 2000, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, Thailand.
- Smith, R.C. (1996). "Group-centred autonomous learning: An "Asian" contribution?" Paper read at Autonomy 2000, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, Thailand.
- オートノミー2000 (言語学習における自立の育成に関する国際大会) が、タイのキング・モンクット工科大学で1996年11月20日から22日まで開かれました。リチャード・スミスさんの詳細な報告をお届けします。
- アジア的自律観からアジア観の修正へ：オートノミー2000を越えて**
リチャード C. スミス
東京外国語大学
- 背景： 「アジアにおける自律」に関する議論
近年、非西洋、とりわけアジアというコンテキストにおける教育のゴールとして自律学習が適切かどうか、ということに関する議論が活発に行なわれてきた。(cf. Farmer, 1994; Aoki, 1994; Jones, 1995; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Pierson, 1996; Aoki and Smith, 1996; and Little, 1996. さらに、1996年11月にタイのトンプリにあるキング・モンクット工科大学で開催されたオートノミー2000においても、以下に述べられていくように、多くの論文が発表された。)
- 以下は、これまでに提示された自律学習を疑問視する見解の一部である(下線筆者)：
1. 「…自律や個々の責任、それに自由といった概念は、教育のコンテキスト同様に社会的コンテキストにおいても現れるものであり、西洋的価値観を伴う」(Jones, 1995: 229)
 2. 「自律というものへの伝統的下地のない文化において自律を純粋な教育目標にすることは、罪-少なくとも文化的に鈍感