# Two stories of self-directed language learning

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**Introduction**

Research into learner autonomy has tended to be situated in the area of institutionalized learning, either focussing on classroom settings or self-access centres. Until recently it has left largely unexplored insights which might be gained from what has been termed *out-of-class* (Benson 2001) language learning Yet, countless individuals around the world have been learning languages on their own without direct institutional ties. Research exploring the experiences of these learners has the potential to further enhance theoretical knowledge as well as inform the practice of educators promoting learner autonomy and supporting self-directed language learning.

This paper aims to explore out-of-class learning by reporting on a narrative research project which uses life history methods to collect the language learning stories of Japanese who have learned English without having studied or lived outside of Japan. A second phase of the inquiry involves collecting the stories of English-speakers who have learned to speak Japanese while living in Japan. Two stories are presented here. One tells about a New Zealand woman in her late 30s who learned Japanese in Tokyo. The other story is about a Japanese man in his late 20s who has been learning English. The paper examines their stories by addressing the following questions:

- To what extent were these learners successful?
- What motivated them to learn the foreign language and to choose self-instruction as a mode of learning?
- What did they do to learn the language?

The original intent of this study was to explore the commonly held belief that the best way to learn a language is to go and live where the language is spoken. What emerged from the very outset of the inquiry was the high level of autonomy and self-direction on the part of the participants. Notions of learner autonomy in this study are informed by Holec's (1981) model where learners must have the ability to take charge of their learning and make decisions related to all aspects of the process. Learners who take responsibility for making these decisions are self-directed (Dickinson 1987). The learners whose stories are recounted in this paper are not only self-directed, but self-instructed ie: they have embarked upon *a deliberate long-term learning project instigated, planned, and carried out by the learner alone* (Jones 1998: 378).

**The study**

Using life history research methods enabled me to document a process spanning a period of many years in the lives of the participants. The first step was to interview the participants, who had been contacted by word of mouth, requesting them to recount how they had learned the language. However, in order to round out the stories, it was necessary to have an interview with questions pertaining to background information and motivation (Deci & Ryan 1985, Gardner 1985, Pierce 1995, Schumann 1997), learning strategies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990), resources and degree of autonomy (Dickinson 1987, Holec 1981, Littlewood 1999 and 1996). As this interview was being transcribed and coded, a list of questions emerged for a second interview. The second step was to interview the participants again. The third step was to create participant stories by integrating and reconfiguring their words into the chronological narrative structure that ran through the interviews. For the most part the stories are the participants' own words but they were proofread with a view to correcting grammar and syntactical errors. As a form of member check (Lather 1986), the participants read their stories and made any changes or additions, they felt necessary.

The stories were then analysed using a combination of what Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) call the *categorical content method of analysis* and what Glaser and Strauss (1967) term the *constant comparative method*. Finally, I asked the following question of the data (Richardson 1994): How might the experiences of these learners inform the work of educators hoping to promote learner autonomy in their classrooms, provide resources to support self-directed learning and/or explore the role of media and technology in independent learning?

**The stories: retold abridged versions**
*Cami's story*
Cami and her husband came to Tokyo to work. Neither undertook any Japanese language courses, but about a month before they left New Zealand, Cami started to learn *hiragana* and *katakana* on her own. Soon after arriving in Tokyo, Cami got a job teaching English at a language school and gradually got part-time jobs at universities.

When Cami arrived in Japan she began an intense period of language study. She bought the popular textbook *Japanese for Busy People Books 1 and 2*, and the accompanying audio-cassette tapes. It took her three months to get through these books. Although she was working at the time, she managed to study about three hours a day. Mostly she would read and listen to the cassettes on the train while commuting to and from work. She would also listen to the cassettes while she was jogging. She followed these books with *An Advanced Book in Japanese*, which dealt with everyday situations and later with *An Intermediate Dictionary of Japanese Grammar.*

The next stage was to learn the kanji. One of Cami's students brought her the material used to teach Japanese students in schools. Setting herself a certain number to learn each day, it took her three months to get through this material, but because the kanji are easy to forget, it was a continual process of review.

Cami felt she needed a more solid background in grammar, so as she worked on the kanji, she studied the preparatory course for the Japanese language proficiency test. There are four levels to this test. Cami skipped the lower levels and started at the second highest, Level 2. Later, she bought the books which Japanese use to prepare for the *Eiken,* the English language proficiency test. She found this helpful because the books provided explanations in Japanese of English expressions.

After she had been studying Japanese for a year and was feeling more confident about the grammar, she started talking more. One of the problems Cami had was finding people who would talk with her in Japanese. She actually asked a couple of female friends, who had been students of hers, to speak to her in Japanese. It was at this point that she really started to make progress. At one point Cami became aware that she needed a more formal Japanese, especially for conversing with people in academic settings, so she started to learn *keigo.*

Also, after the first year she started listening to the news on TV. About three years later, she started watching American sitcoms, such as *Friends.* She found reading the subtitles very useful. She also made use of a monthly magazine for people who are learning Japanese. The magazine, which came with an audio-cassette, had news items, cultural articles, a grammar section and explanations of colloquial Japanese.

After studying Japanese on her own for six years, Cami took the Japanese Language Proficiency Test and passed the Level 2, high intermediate. Eighteen months later she and her husband returned to New Zealand.

*Shinji's story*
When Shinji started to learn English at the age of 12 in junior high school, he did not like it very much. He was very nervous in class because many of his classmates had already studied English privately. He had classes four times a week which were based on the grammar translation method. Outside class he listened regularly to the NHK [the Japanese public broadcasting system] radio English conversation program. In high school the studying intensified because the students were preparing to write university entrance examinations. Although there was no conversation, one teacher gave the students opportunities to ask questions about topics of their choosing. Shinji also belonged to the English Speaking Society. While club members tried to speak English, their level was so low that there was no real conversation, only asking and answering questions. When Shinji was 15, his name appeared on his school's list of students who had scored the highest in English. This gave Shinji the confidence and motivation to work even harder at his English.

Around the same time, Shinji discovered he loved movies. He realized that if he were going to understand movies, he needed English. For a period of four or five years, he went to the movies once a week. He would take his lunch and stay all day. He might watch the same movie two or three times. The first time he would just watch the movie, the second time he would try not to read the subtitles.

When he entered university, he got a job in a movie theatre.

At university Shinji decided to study German instead of English. He thought he could learn English by himself through study, watching movies and listening to the NHK programs.

Through his university club activity, the mixed choral society, Shinji met some American exchange students. One became his roommate for six months. When he moved out, another friend moved in and stayed for eight months. Although they commu nicated mostly in Japanese, Shinji felt he learned a lot of cultural things.

Approximately, six years before the interview, Shinji moved to Tokyo to work in an international hotel. He worked his way from housekeeping to the front desk, so he really needed his English. However, he found it relatively easy to communicate in English because of the formulaic nature of the language used in the hotel setting.

After Shinji moved to Tokyo, he did not have time to keep up with the radio English lessons. Until recently he continued to study vocabulary from small books that he could take with him wherever he went. He also started to record some of his favourite TV programs, such as *ER*, *Full House* and *Ally McBeal*. After first listening to these programs in Japanese, he listens to them repeatedly in English.

When Shinji sat for the second interview, he was working in the personnel division of an English language school. He estimated that he was spending 80% of his workday communicating in English. He was again sharing an apartment with a native-speaker of English.

### Discussion
*How successful were these language learners?*
If we compare the experiences of these two learners, one of the most striking points is the timeframe. Shinji has been studying English for 18 years, whereas Cami has been studying Japanese for six. Yet, both are approximately at the same level of listening and speaking proficiency in their target language. Cami passed Level 2 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, which is normally reached after having studied Japanese for 600 hours and having completed an intermediate level course. According to Cami's own assessment, she can easily converse on a lot of everyday topics, as well as understand the news and most Japanese television programs.

To ascertain Shinji's level of proficiency, I used the Canadian Language Benchmarks (Pawlikowska - Smith 2000), which offer a twelve-point performance-based scale for each of the four skills. Combining information Shinji gave about what he was able to do in English with the language sample provided by the two interviews, I was able to determine his level. For example, in his present job Shinji interviews English-speaking teachers and makes presentations at orientation and training sessions. He estimates that he can understand approximately 70% of a movie without reading the subtitles. These and other abilities would definitely place him at a high intermediate level.

*What motivated these learners?*
Both Cami and Shinji were highly motivated. This is obvious from the amount of time and effort they devoted to the learning process as well as the satisfaction they got from being able to communicate in their target language. According to Gardner (1985), these are key indicators of motivation.

Specific comments made by Cami and Shinji regarding their motivation lend themselves to interpretation through a number of theoretical perspectives. Cami's statements regarding her desire to learn about the culture and the people could be viewed from the perspectives of intrinsic (Deci & Ryan 1985) and integrative motivation (Gardner and Lambert 1959, Masgoret and Gardner 2003), as well as acculturation theory (Schumann 1978). She said: *Learning the language is satisfying. To be able to communicate, it's just somehow important for me. You can't fit in properly until you know the language*. Later, she said: *I think if you go to learn a language, it's a good idea if you think you want to be part of the culture and you want to have friends because otherwise you put a lot of energy and time into it for very little return*. These comments also reflect Pierce's (1995) investment theory. When Cami realises her investment is not paying off in terms of friendships and she is faced with a growing awareness of the limited possibilities for integration into Japanese society, her motivation diminishes.

Shinji's desire to learn English received impetus from having his name appear on his school's honour

role, suggesting that his motivation might be explained in part by attribution theory (for a discussion of autonomy and attribution theory see Dickinson, 1995). He said: *I was very proud of myself. It made me feel good, I got confidence ... So, I learned English more than before.* Other comments indicate a love of American culture and a desire to be a part of that culture. He said: *It was during this time that I found I loved movies ... So, I thought, if I am going to understand movies, I need English. I think what attracted me to movies was the culture.* Later, he said: *I think my secret to learning English is just my interest in the culture, especially of America. I have had this big dream, someday I want to live abroad, so living abroad means needing to learn English. It's my life work to learn English. Living abroad is my aim in my life, so it is a big motivation to learn English.*

For both Shinji and Cami, an interest in the target culture was a key factor in their motivation. Moreover, while their motivation can be interpreted from a variety of theoretical perspectives, a common denominator is their personal identity. The close connection of motivation to the learner's identity reinforces the importance of personalising the learning ie: of creating learning structures which enable learners to engage in activities which correspond to their needs and interests.

As for why he opted for self-instruction, Shinji said: *What helps me the most is conversation in real life. I never had any interest in going to English class because I think that is not life.* Cami has rejected classroom learning for affective reasons. She explains: *I've never taken classes because I'm not a good student in classes. I worry about the teacher getting irritated - putting up with my mistakes - and I get really embarrassed.*

*What did these language learners do to learn the language?*
For many educators, inherent in conceptions of learner autonomy and self-directed learning is the belief that learners need training in order to *learn how to learn* a language. Holec (1980) was of the opinion that learners should train themselves using a discovery or trial-and-error method as they engage in the language learning process. Neither of the learners in this study received any learner training nor did they do anything on their own to find out how to learn a language. The stories of Cami and Shinji suggest they relied on past experience and used the discovery method in order to ascertain what worked best for them. Cami said: *I had had some experience learning foreign languages. I learned Indonesian, German and French. I was an exchange student in Indonesia for one year ... I knew how to go about learning grammar and that you just have to repeat, repeat, repeat–there's just no getting away from it. I'm a trained language teacher, but that didn't help me when it came to learning the language. I knew how to learn a language from studying at school, and learning what worked for me, which was just hard work.*

There is a saying that teachers have a tendency to teach in the manner in which they have been taught. In other words, they replicate the teaching style and methods that they themselves experienced as students in the classroom. Cami's comments suggest that learners tend to learn in the manner in which they have been taught.

Willing (1988) notes that by their very nature learning activities require students to engage in learning strategies whether these are made explicit or not. Willing (1988: 151) says: *A highly significant implication of the conscious-unconscious nature of learning strategies is, therefore, that the teacher is always and inevitably modelling and giving practice in these strategies, as well as teaching English language content.* Therefore, as educators endeavouring to promote learner autonomy, we must carefully examine all aspects of our practice to ensure that the methods, activities and procedures we use reflect principles of learner autonomy, and model for learners techniques and strategies they can use to learn the language in self-directed or self-instructed learning situations.

Both Cami and Shinji went through an initial phase of intense language study and gradually moved into a phase of learning through language use. Cami employed two strategies worthy of note. In the first place she made the foreign language the medium as well as the content of her learning. Before she did anything else, Cami started to teach herself to read in the foreign language. As she gained in reading proficiency, she was able to learn the grammar and vocabulary through books written in Japanese. Secondly, Cami employed a spiral approach in order to commit to memory the material she was covering. She said: *The pattern was repeating, adding on, going back to the base and making sure that I knew all the old stuff.*

During the language use phase, Cami continued to review as well as monitor her grammar usage. *I*

*would think about things that I had wanted to say that day to my friends, and I would think, 'How should I have said that?'  'What was the right thing to say?' I would look at my grammar and try to find some point that would help me express what I wanted to say. Then I would call my friend and say, 'Which is right, this or this? ... I would always ask for assurance like, 'Was that right? Did I say that right?' Just that reassurance was a huge lift.*

Cami's comments are a reminder of the importance of feedback to the learning process, as well as to learner motivation. Moreover, they point to an important role for a teacher in a self-directed and, ironically, a self-instruction program. Learners engaging in self-instruction not only need to know they are getting it right but at times they need to have aspects of the language explained to them. In addition to studying grammar, Cami worked on her listening skills by watching the news and other television programs.

Listening played a crucial part in both Cami and Shinji's language learning. Learners need exposure to the language. Shinji relied on movies for this exposure to the extent that he stated: *Movies is my teacher*. In the following quote Shinji outlines the strategy he has for learning from both movies and television programs:
*Since I moved to Tokyo, I tend to record some of my favourite TV programs, like ER, Full House and Ally McBeal. The first time I just listen to the program in Japanese because that's the easiest way to understand the story. After that, I try to listen to English without any subtitles. I listen to my favourite programs over and over. I learn some basic usual phrases that I can use in daily conversation. This is real conversation with people and sometimes I can learn about the culture. So, there's lots of things I can learn, more than from a textbook.*

Shinji also explains that by contextualizing the language these television programs and movies show him how the items he learns can be used in real life situations. He then looks for similar situations in which he can use them.

The English language conversation programs on the Japanese public broadcasting radio and television network are very careful to point out to learners how and in what situations the words and phrases they introduce can be used. Perhaps Shinji, who has listened to the radio programs for years, unconsciously picked up this strategy: *That program helped me a lot. Because there was a story through the year, it was very meaningful and very easy to understand the situation. Sometimes the words were very difficult, but the story helped me to understand the situation, and the situation helped me to understand the words or phrases. The story continued from week to week so it was very interesting for the student.*

Shinji's experience suggests the need for language learning programs with a narrative structure. The story not only makes these programs engaging but offers opportunities to model how to use the language being taught in socially and culturally appropriate ways. Moreover, Shinji says he likes movies because he likes *to see other worlds.* Learners like Shinji could benefit from interactive video programs, similar to those developed at MIT in the 1980s, that actually invited learners into a fictional world and enabled them to play a part in the story (Furstenberg, 1994). Programs such as these could greatly benefit learners who have limited or no contact with target language communities (Murray 1999, Murray and Kouritzin 1997).

While many of the activities of the language study phase can take place in isolation, Shinji's goal was to use his English in real life situations. He says: *I have studied English by myself. Language is words to communicate eventually. So, learning English is not only for me, not only for myself, so I can't be satisfied with learning alone. Eventually, I want to use my English with somebody else.*

Shinji has created opportunities to communicate through social networking. He has had three English-speaking roommates. In addition to this, Shinji has chosen to work in the hospitality and language school industries, which have bought him into contact with native speakers. He has been learning English by being a participant in a variety of communities of practice (Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989, Lave and Wenger 1991). As Shinji's opportunities for language use increased, the time he had to devote to language study diminished: *Since I got to Tokyo, I almost stopped studying English by radio. I have lots of opportunity to use English at my office, so now I just use English.*

In contrast to Shinji's experience, Cami has had very few opportunities for communication in Japanese despite a strong desire to speak the language. Commenting on her first year in Tokyo, she said: *During*

*that time I had almost no opportunities to use my Japanese because I was teaching English all the time. Everyone I met was totally uninterested in speaking Japanese with me because they wanted to practise their English. That's been a continuing problem, getting people to speak Japanese.*

Other than two young women who had been her students, a family who befriended her and her husband (and who wanted to learn English) and a secretary where she worked, Cami said: *No one else really talks to me*. These people represent a fairly limited number of contacts, taking into consideration a seven-year timeframe and Cami's outgoing and friendly disposition.

Recently, Pierce (1995) has noted that identity and social position play a role in determining opportunities to communicate in the target language culture. Siegal (1996: 376), who studied Caucasian women learning Japanese in Japan, states that *the inability to speak pragmatically appropriate Japanese would increase alienation in terms of social contact*. Seigal (1996) recommends open discussion in the language classroom about how the language is used in the target language society, including those factors underlying power relations, such as race, gender, social class and age. Educators need to find ways of opening the discussion to self-directed learners who would not necessarily be able to rely on classroom instruction. Perhaps one solution would be a website which offered access to a discussion group.

**Conclusion: The implications for educators**

The experiences of the learners in this study suggest several implications for educators who are promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms, providing resources to support self-directed learning, and/or exploring the role of media and technology in independent learning. The first implication has to do with the complex area of motivation. In keeping with recent research findings, the stories of these learners suggest that motivation is a multi-faceted phenomenon closely linked to the identity of the learner (Pierce 1995, Schumann 1997, Masgoret and Gardner 2003). Clearly, this presents a challenge for classroom teachers. Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) suggest that teachers might develop students' intrinsic motivation by using activities and materials that students find engaging. For insights into what these might be, teachers should explore what learners are already doing outside of the classroom. This study suggests these activities are predominately related to media and pop culture. Not only are these media and pop culture activities engaging for learners (Chueng 2001), but learners need at least some knowledge of pop culture in order to communicate effectively in the target language (Duff 2001). Therefore, educators should make optimal use of all forms of media in order to develop learning activities which rely on pop culture as a source of content.

Implicit in Shinji's use of movies to learn the language is the notion that movies offer him access to a virtual target language community. His experience implies the need for programs such as *À la rencontre de Philippe* (Furstenberg 1993), an interactive video program that enabled French language learners to take on the role of a character in the story, providing them with the experience of being transported into a fictional world (Furstenberg 1994, Murray 1999). Besides bringing learners into direct contact with the target language, these programs could enhance listening comprehension and learning in general, by providing the option of text to accompany the audio (Borrás and Lafeyette 1994, Brett 1995), demonstrating how the language is used in everyday life and offering explanations related to usage and culture. Educators should be using the latest technology to develop multimedia programs which have the potential to invite learners into fictional worlds where they can be immersed in the target language and culture.

Another point is that learners need training in pragmatics and intercultural communicative competence. While this is not new, the present challenge is to make this training available to self-directed learners, especially those studying outside of a classroom or an institutional setting. One possibility is through websites and discussion groups. Another possibility is to make this training a feature of the proposed interactive software.

A final implication deals with learner training and the role of the teacher. Since our practice as language teachers has the potential to provide implicit learner training, we need to be very careful that the methods, procedures and activities we employ promote learner autonomy by modelling for students strategies which they can use in self-directed learning. In other words, learner autonomy has to become a mind-set, or a lens, through which we view all aspects of each learning experience.

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