

**Eric M. Skier and Miki Kohyama (eds.) (2006) *More Autonomy You Ask!*  
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Reviewed by Darren Elliott,  
Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan  
darrenreliott@yahoo.co.uk

'More Autonomy You Ask' is the follow-up volume to the outstanding 2003 publication '(everything you wanted to know about) Autonomy (but) You (were too busy teaching to) Ask'. An excellent review of 'AYA!', by Androulla Althanasiou, was published in issue 40 of 'independence'.

Produced by the Learner Development Special Interest Group of the Japan Association of Language Teachers, like the first in the series 'MAYA!' is an edited work collecting studies and reflections from teacher-researchers across Japan and beyond. There are two loosely themed sections, 'Inquiry into Language Learners' and 'Inquiry into Instructional Practices', with introductory, bridging and summarising chapters from guest authors. The reader is also assisted in making sense of what he or she has read by the critical responses at the end of each chapter, one by another contributor and a second by a well-known researcher in the field of autonomy.

What gives the book its remarkable cohesion is the truly collaborative nature of its development. Skier and Kohyama explain the process, and the reasoning behind it, in their forward. After the initial proposals, writers gathered at a retreat to hone and reflect on their work through discussion. At the end of the retreat, each researcher was assigned two collaborative partners; one to correspond with via email, and one 'local' partner for face to face dialogue.

Besides the practical benefits to the writing and editing process, this seems to be an important conceptual, or even political, statement. The editors and authors are not writing about the value of cooperation whilst locked alone in their garrets, and this sets the whole tone of the text. 'Autonomy' does not mean 'alone', but is greatly enhanced by working with others to achieve shared goals. Less explicitly expressed perhaps, but still something that I took from the book, was the significance of teacher autonomy and its relationship to learner autonomy.

After Krashen's introduction, Head (chapter two) contributes a chapter which sets the context for learner autonomy in Japan. Her own research focused on the attitudes of student teachers in training and indicated that her students were neither passive nor non-critical. Her historical overview also highlights the precedents for independent thinking in Japanese education. This was a vitally important point to make at the outset of the book; certainly, 'autonomy' is not a prefabricated model which can be set up in any culture or classroom, but neither is it a purely 'European' idea which can never work in Asia. Head's chapter helps the reader to pick up this thread and follow it through the book.

Shimo (chapter four) provides a good example how 'autonomy' is being adapted to fit Japanese situations in her piece on 'Collaborative Shadowing'. In a narrow definition of the term, this fairly directed activity might not be seen as particularly autonomous, but such criticism would be churlish when faced with the responses of the students who felt empowered and more able to reflect on their work. Reflection is another fundamental notion that crops up frequently throughout MAYA!, and in the next chapter (five) Wakui explains how she encouraged reflection through peer and self assessment in a presentation class. After early hesitancy she found that the students gained confidence and self-awareness that she claims is crucial to language development. Cotterall's critical response compares her own experience of a similar project, and concurs with the main piece. Surma and Usuki also deal with presentations and 'stage fright' in chapter six.

One problematical area for those seeking to foster autonomy in education is that of assessment. This is particularly true in what Davies calls the 'exam-driven, pressure-cooker Japanese school system' (p.31). Harrison (chapter seven) used the creation of tests as both a learning and assessment tool to great effect, but in order to do so admits he had to allow the learning experience to take precedence over test validity. Nonetheless, the students were motivated and communicative, and as Nix puts it in his critical response '(is it) actually more autonomy-inviting for students to explore, deconstruct, and subvert the very conventions of test-based evaluation (?). Echoing Aoki's critical response to Head (p. 30), Harrison also wrestled with the uses of English and Japanese. Aoki points to the difficulties of researchers who don't speak the language of their research subjects, and Harrison decided to allow the use of Japanese in class prioritising the autonomous aspects over language practice for certain activities. This poses the question – does language sometimes get in the way of autonomy, and does the pursuit of autonomy threaten the quality of language instruction? Asaoka summarises the previous chapters and reiterates the importance of interaction in autonomy to bring the first section to a close.

The next section begins with Deacon and Croker's discussion of their peer-teaching project (chapter nine). Giving up control of the class (or at least, appearing to) is challenging for many teachers, and accepting responsibility terrifying for many students. These students certainly felt so at first, but with support and lightly applied guidance were immensely rewarded. This chapter was particularly resonant with me, reminding me of a similar project (on a much smaller scale) I undertook myself. It was fascinating to see the students begin to understand the teaching process, and realise that classes are not a string of random activities bundled together but have goals and carefully constructed pathways. Learners who see this, who have a heightened level of awareness, are better positioned to maximise their learning potential.

Chapter ten is an enthralling representation of a class in which everyone comes together perfectly. In her well-considered longitudinal study, Morimoto sought (and is still seeking) to discover how her failing group became one of the most autonomous and bonded classes she had ever worked with, and cites a number of situational factors which contribute to the success or failure of a group. However, what I took from the chapter is that a group of young people just clicked. Sometimes it is chastening to remember that students have lives beyond the classroom and that we as teachers have minimal influence on their success or failure as learners. Morimoto has subsequently written another paper focusing more centrally on group dynamics, which I look forward to reading. In the meantime, I heartily recommend Senior's recent book 'The Experience of Language Teaching' for an examination of the language classroom as a social organism.

In chapter eleven, Haugh sets out a quintessential example of a teacher facing resistance. Dramatised role-plays proved to be outside the students' comfort zone, although when the pedagogical reasoning behind the technique was clearly laid out there was a thawing of tension – something to remember. Ultimately though, as Doud points out in his critical response, autonomy cannot be enforced through methods which the students are reluctant to take up. Initially I agreed unreservedly with this, but reading chapters thirteen (Bradley) and fourteen (Stephenson), both based on the use of reflective journals, I reconsidered. Without some pushing from a teacher, students may give up too soon on a process or method with real value. We must be cautious, though, when selecting methods or materials about which we ourselves are very enthusiastic; we can easily lose sight of the students' standpoint. This is the warning sounded by Davies in chapter fifteen, a dark allegory which reminds us that autonomy should come up from below. In between times, Graves and Vye take a slightly lighter tone on reflection linking the personal to the professional in chapter twelve.

Lamb draws the book to a close, and the threads together, in the final chapter. To us as individuals, and to those considering the culture or context they are working in, he offers words of great hope. Individual differences are not fixed, nor pathological, but depend on context. Context, on the other hand, is constantly in flux. I see these words as hopeful because, as Lamb points out, they make us ultimately responsible for ourselves. And that, after all, is what autonomy is all about.

