INITIATING LEARNER AUTONOMY WITH CALL

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Introduction: This paper reports on an on-going action research project in which ICT (Information and communication technology) was introduced into selected oral English classes (approx. 300 students in total). The students, attending a Japanese university specialising in health and animal sciences, were enrolled in a required English B course that has speaking and listening skills as its primary focus. A colleague, David Brooks, and I cooperated to develop a program that integrates email, internet-based activities and authoring software into a course that covers the functional language usually neglected during the first six years of formal English study in Japan. At the beginning and close of the academic year, students in classes that were exposed to ICT, and those in English B classes where teachers made no use of computers, were surveyed to determine their pervious experience with — and attitudes toward — ICT and language learning. Some of the results of the two surveys will be presented here.

We embarked on this project knowing that the time demands of the computer activities might prevent us from dealing with the range of functions and conversational strategies that we had covered in previous years. However, we felt that the ICT would allow us to deal with this narrower range at greater depth, in still higher levels of motivation, engage students in real world tasks, provide them with some additional useful skills, and, most importantly, help free them from a dependence on teachers for achieving language learning goals. The surveys showed mixed results, but participants in the ICT classes made greater effort to speak English with their classmates and teacher. They were also more likely to anticipate a need for English in their future lives.

How ICT was used: We chose computer activities partly on the basis of available software, which included, a web browser, HyperStudio (an authoring package similar to HyperCard but easier to use and capable of producing a more attractive final product) and word processing software. We wanted the computer activities to be useful for students in continuing their English study after the course ended and in their speciality-related courses. Goals for the CALL element of the course included:
* register for a web-based email account
* become comfortable using email
* join a class mailing list that would later be opened to students in other countries
* learn how to use the Internet to gather information

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* employ the information in tasks — to be accomplished on the mailing list — that reinforce functions covered in the course book (inviting, negotiating plans, giving directions, etc.)
* create a HyperStudio Stack that integrates email experiences, personal information and a presentation of what interests them most in their major area of study [See Wachman (1999) for a comprehensive treatment of the use of authoring software to foster learner autonomy.]

Computers in Japanese education — still lagging but catching up: Holmes (1998) has noted the paradox that although Japan is a technologically advanced country it has been much slower than the West in introducing ICT into schools (p. 184). Computers were brought into schools as part of reforms proposed in the early 1980s that were intended to nurture a freer and more flexible educational system. Deep structural change proved impossible to achieve. The much criticised and demoralising system of entrance examinations has remained in place, however, the reforms calling for the education system to enter the information age and to internationalise received enough support to lead (then Prime Minister) Nakasone to create an advisory council that played a key role in introducing computers into schools (Sakamoto & Gardener, 1995).

The reforms have had a negligible effect on preparing university students for effectively using computers as tools. In our survey we found that 26.9 percent of freshmen respondents (out of 942 asked) had not used a computer for functions other than games before entering university. Few of those who had previous exposure to computers in schools had adequate typing skills or experience dealing with email or the Internet. So, in leaving it up to insufficiently trained teachers in individual schools to implement specific programmes, the policies of the Ministry of Education have led to an uneven and scanty introduction of ICT skills.

Cultural factors affecting Japanese students' reception of self-directed learning: In her article on autonomy and language learning, Healey (1999) notes:

> As teachers of individuals from a variety of cultures ... it behoves ESL/EFL professionals to keep in mind that learner self-direction and autonomous learning are Western concepts that fit smoothly into U.S. culture in particular. These concepts may not be as logical to others ... . (p. 391)

In his groundbreaking work on the Japanese psyche (Doi, 1971), the psychiatrist Takeo Doi, relates an experience he had soon after he arrived in America to study psychiatry. Although he knew that Americans used the expression 'please help yourself' as a matter of kindness, it left an unpleasant ring in his ears. He understood that it meant 'please take what you want without hesitation', but he couldn't help but feel that the phrase

implied 'if you don't help yourself, nobody else will'. He could not see how it came to be an expression of good will.

Instead of completely going against the cultural grain, we tried to channel classroom behaviour that many Western teachers (and quite a few Japanese) see as antithetical to autonomy, into constructive directions. For example, when asked a question by a teacher it is common for Japanese students — from elementary to university level — to turn to classmates sitting nearby and engage in a sometimes lengthy and animated discussion in Japanese about how the question can best be answered. This is not seen as abnormal behaviour and in my fifteen years of teaching in Japan I have never observed classmates chastise such students for wasting their time. It is seen as a natural part of the classroom experience. When this behaviour is suppressed by teachers who believe that students 'should stand on their own two feet', the result is frequently a standing statue, as silent as the Buddha.

In a computer classroom, the same behaviour that teachers have considered annoying, rude and counterproductive, can become efficient cooperative learning. For instance, if a student asks the teacher what might be preventing his email account application from being processed, the teacher might ask 'Did you fill out the zip code field?' (the most common reason for failure). If the student then engages classmates on either side of him with the questions 'Where is that field located?' and 'What does 'zip code' mean?' (which most students eventually are able to infer from the context) and 'Should I use my home or the university zip code?', the teacher is free to respond to other questions and students have, in a sense, helped themselves.

Structuring the ICT environment: Being aware that students might interpret our efforts to help them become more autonomous learners as an abandonment of our responsibilities as teachers and as a way to minimise contact with them, we carefully thought out how we would structure the ICT aspect of our course to minimise misunderstanding and the loss of motivation that might ensue. We fully concurred with Dickinson's (1987, p. 15) view that 'the promotion of self-direction encourages learners to make free choices, including the choice to follow a highly directed course'. We tried to accommodate various approaches to learning with the goal of bringing all students farther along the autonomy continuum. We did this by providing a variety of channels which students could attend to when accomplishing tasks. For example, when engaging in the rather complex processes of registering for an email account and joining a class mailing list, students were supported in the following ways:

* Detailed directions were handed out. [For Japanese students, accustomed to being hand fed knowledge that they are not expected to translate into action, it takes a great deal of self-direction to carry out instructions, particularly if they are written in English.]

* Teachers were present initially and students could freely ask them for assistance. [This mode was preferred by the majority of students and, as the focus of the course was speaking and listening skills, we didn't discourage it as long an attempt was made to use English.]

* Teachers identified areas that caused students most difficulty and instructed students in a jigsaw manner so they would have complementary knowledge they could share with others. [Students were not left to voluntarily teach classmates; they were told to stand up and go around the room teaching everyone else what they had just been taught.]

To someone unfamiliar with teaching environments in Japan, it might appear that this approach has little to do with encouraging self-direction and autonomy. It can even be argued that some of the procedures promote greater dependence on the teacher and classmates. Depending on the efforts of others to understand what we mean, and the responsibility for determining what we need to ask (or tell) in order to understand (or be understood), are taken for granted in the first language, but, when L2 is taught with little regard to its communicative qualities — as it is in Japan — these skills do not become established. As language learning and use is a social activity, and Japanese students have had little experience learning/using English for social purposes, it is necessary to set up situations in which communicating in the target language is perceived as being possible and even desirable. This was a necessary step in structuring the self-directed learning we hoped would follow.

Effects of the ICT environment on attitudes and behaviour: Referring to the results of our surveys, we will describe and try to account for changes we measured and observed in students' attitudes and behaviour. The survey was intended to determine students' preparedness for using computers and the effect of their use on attitudes, motivation and English usage.

Two surveys were administered; the first one, five or six weeks into the spring term (but before ICT was introduced), and the other at the end of the second term of the year-long course. Both surveys, which were translated into Japanese, offered 50 multiple choice items that could be answered on a computer mark card. Some of the items (those that used a four-point Likert Scale) were identical in the two surveys to help us examine whether measurable changes could be detected. The second survey mainly dealt with previous language learning experiences and computer use before and during the academic year. Three categories of students enrolled in the English B course were surveyed: those taught by Japanese teachers (without ICT — labelled 'Japanese Ts'), those taught by the present writer and an American colleague employing ICT (D/B — Dias and Brooks), and students taught by another American teacher who used a functional, conversational strategy-based text similar to the one we were using but made

no use of ICT. The number of students surveyed in each of the categories and the average number of students per/class who responded are noted below:

Japanese Ts (w/out ICT)	D/B(using ICT)	Other NS teacher(w/out ICT)
Total: 552	311	252
Ave # of Ss		
per/class: 34.5	38.88	31.5

[Total surveyed in the first survey: 1115 students]

The number of students in the three groups who completed the second survey were as follows:

Japanese Ts (w/out ICT)	D/B(using ICT)	Other NS teacher(w/out ICT)
Total: 532	280	135
Ave # of Ss		
per/class: 33.25	35	33.75

[Total surveyed in the second survey 942 students]

One interesting finding was that whether students used ICT in their English class or not, those who used the Internet in the two groups showed similar usage patterns. 'Studying English' was dead last (or tied for last) in both groups. The results are summarised below:

Q) If you use the Internet, for what purpose do you use it? (multiple answers are possible)

	ICT Classes	Non ICT classes
private interest related	54.5	46.8
surfing (without purpose)	34.4	32.9
have not used the internet	20.1	30
class-related research	12.2	11.2
chatting	11.8	7.9
shopping or travel info	7.6	5.3
to study English	7.6	0.8

After going to great lengths to make it possible for students to have more contact with English by searching English web sites and using the language meaningfully in email exchanges, we were, at first, rather disheartened to find that our students ranked 'studying English' as low as students in classes where ICT was not used. How can this be explained? One optimistic possibility is that students were so unaccustomed to studying English in this way that they were reluctant to label it as 'English study'. As one of our stated goals was to increase learner autonomy, we are pleased that almost 9 percent more of our students used the Internet to pursue private interests. Of course, we

would be more pleased if this was done in English. We plan to add an item to the next version of the survey to find out which of the activities were done in English. The finding that 20.1 percent of our students reported never having used the Internet is perplexing since we know that virtually all of them DID make use of it, at least, to sign up for an email account, join a mailing list and do various web-based activities. It is possible that these students did not realise they were on the Internet.

The most surprising and encouraging findings were that students in the ICT-supported classes reported making more effort to speak English with both classmates and their teacher. A summary of the data showing the frequency of English use with classmates in English B is as follows:

Q) In English B class I made an effort to speak English with *classmates*.

	D/B	Jpn	Other
always	17	1.5	1.5
sometimes	33	1.9	3
rarely	33	7.9	34.1
above 3 categories combined	83	11.3	38.6

The extraordinarily large difference in reported English usage between our students and those taught by Japanese teachers, can partially be explained by the tendency for Japanese teachers to rely on the grammar translation method even when teaching courses ostensibly concerned with oral/aural skills. They are also less likely to use English to conduct classroom business or in giving directions. However, the large difference between our students' reported use of English with classmates and that of students taught by the other foreign teacher cannot be explained in this way. The foreign teacher who did not employ ICT did pair and group work, and evaluated students' development of oral skills in private interviews more frequently than we did. One explanation for the striking differences is that they are partially the result of our 'jigsaw teaching', in which we taught individual students how to accomplish a task on the computer and then they were asked to teach it to the others in the class. Students were able to put the modelled English explanation to immediate use. This may have had the auxiliary effect of making them comfortable and confident enough in using English to make more of an effort to speak with classmates during pair and group activities in our classes that took place outside the computer lab.

In the case of speaking English with *the teacher,* the differences are even more striking between the ICT group and those taught without ICT by Japanese teachers, but there is a narrower difference between the ICT group and those taught by the other foreign teacher.

Q) In English B class I made an effort to speak English with my *teacher*.

	D/B	Jpn	Other
always	24.3	0.6	14.8
sometimes	38.5	2.1	31.9
rarely	32.6	11.1	40.7
above 3 categories combined	95.4	13.8	87.4

The larger percentages in the 'D/B' and 'Other' categories (compared with the 'speaking English with classmates' item) can be explained partly by the fact that students feel a greater need to speak English with an English native speaker teacher than with their Japanese counterparts. Although the difference in combined frequency levels between 'D/B' and 'Other' is only 8 percent, almost 10 percent more of the ICT-supported students report *always* using English with their teacher. We believe this is due to increased need created by the ICT tasks to seek clarification and receive help when things went wrong.

Another difference between the ICT-supported and non ICT-supported groups was that higher percentages of the former saw a need for English for a variety of purposes in their future life. The results are summarised as follows:

Q) In your future life and work in what situations do you think English will be necessary?

	D/B	Jpn	Other
to understand & communicate w/ foreigners	62.8	53.2	45.2
for travel	55.6	40.8	37
to write reports and theses in English	42	39.7	33.3
to read newspapers, magazines, etc.	41.3	36.1	29.6
to use the Internet	28.8	20.3	19.3
to be able to understand films & other media	27.1	19.9	13.3
to write email in English	23.6	14.7	13.3

Interestingly, the *order* of perceived importance of English uses is constant in the three groups; they differ only in *magnitude*. We were pleased with this result in that we felt that perceived need would be tied to motivation and lead to a greater likelihood that English study will be continued after the completion of required courses (one of our principal project goals).

A behaviour that we may have inadvertently encouraged with our ICT-supported students was the teaching of students from *other* classes how to sign up for web-based email accounts and use the Internet. Outside of class time we frequently observed our students in the computer lab giving impromptu 'lessons' to friends from other classes.

This may explain an odd anomaly in our data. When asked what they thought about the statement: 'Computers cannot help to improve one's ability to communicate in English?' percentages of those who 'disagreed' or 'disagreed strongly' are noted below.

First semester results (before ICT activities) % of Ss who *dis*agreed			Second semester results (after ICT activities) % of Ss who *dis*agreed		
D/B	Jpn	Other NS T	D/B	Jpn	Other NS T
61.6	49.8	52.8	75.4	67.4	74.8

<u>Jump from First to Second survey</u>
D/B: 13.8
Jpn: 17.6
Other NS T: 22

A higher percentage of our students felt that computers could help in improving English communication skills both before and after the ICT activities were introduced. The most striking feature of the results, however, is the fact that non-ICT classes made more dramatic gains from the first to the second semester in positively regarding the role of computers in English education. Why should students who had no exposure to computers for language learning purposes show so much greater gains? The only explanation that is consistent with our observations is that the unprompted teaching our students gave to their friends in the non-ICT classes gave the recipients a feeling for the potential for ICT in language learning. So much so that they came to (at least in the case of the students taught by the other NS) value it nearly as highly as our students. Another possibility, which is not mutually exclusive with the first, is that students in non-ICT classes who did not receive exposure to computers through friends, may have been influenced into thinking that ICT might have a lot to offer language learners by hearing about the experiences of those doing the CALL activities. The 'grass is greener' phenomenon might have been at work.

Conclusion: It is not possible to say that the ICT-supported course led students to be autonomous learners in any absolute way. However, these students did report greater amounts of English usage with classmates and teachers. From our observations, we speculate that the jigsaw presentation of ICT tasks and the necessity for students to acquire skills and knowledge to complete tasks led to more English being spoken. In addition to teaching their newly acquired skills to classmates some of the ICT students shared their knowledge with students from other classes. We hope to measure and more closely observe this unprompted teaching in our on-going study. To be a teacher is perhaps the ultimate in autonomy and we hope to encourage such behaviour as much as possible.

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