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## Promoting Learner Autonomy through Tandem Learning in a Japanese ESL Context

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### Abstract

Computer-mediated form of language learning provides the opportunity to engage in meaningful and authentic interaction in the target language. Through interaction and collaboration, learners are said to develop a sense of autonomy (Little, 2001). Studies from the literature show that Japanese learners do not lack the capacity for self-directed learning but rather, the language learning environment that has been created by most Japanese institutions has implicitly discouraged learners from becoming autonomous learners (Holden & Usuki, 1999; MEXT, 2013). This study seeks to explore how tandem learning could foster an autonomous learning environment in an EFL classroom in Japan. It will describe learners' perception of the Facebook Project, and whether it has helped this group of learners assume more responsibility for the learning process. Findings show that the project enhanced intrinsic motivation, promoted learner reflection, and students took the initiative to reciprocate with their tandem partners' language needs. Implications of the study suggest that learners need to be involved in the design of learning environments and adequate levels of technological proficiency are necessary to prepare learners for more self-directed learning.

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### Introduction

The impact of the Internet on language learning in the context of higher education has grown exponentially in the last twenty years. The rapid development of web 2.0 tools has been seen as important to language learning as they are well suited to the acquisition of foreign languages and hybrid environments as it fosters both interaction and collaboration (Lomicka & Lord, 2009). In the context of Japanese higher education, the Ministry of Education, Health, and Sciences (MEXT) have been commissioning institutions to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and improve their critical digital literacy skills (MEXT, 2018). This is in response to the increasing number of student populations who have access to a wide variety of mobile applications, digital technologies, and networking opportunities. Subsequently, the sudden move for institutions to adopt digital technologies, due in part to the impact of the pandemic, has forced many Japanese institutions to further explore the potential benefits of digital media technologies such as web 2.0 tools to provide more flexibility in promoting better participation and capturing and maintaining the interest of students in face-to-face, online or hybrid environments. This provides them with new incentives, and opportunities to interact with people from across the globe. Alongside the adoption of digital technology, the MEXT directive also emphasizes autonomous learning, thus many tertiary institutions

aim to develop it in students, particularly in students studying foreign languages. It is generally seen that having the volition for language learning is a necessary skill to achieve proficiency in the target language. MEXT (2013) requires that educational institutions incorporate the development and motivation of students to become more autonomous language learners in their curricula. Consequently, MEXT (2013) calls for more teacher-centered instruction and for language classrooms to focus on teaching communicative competence to enable students to solve problems independently and become more adaptable to social changes.

There is often a misconception that Japanese learners are less autonomous compared to learners from different cultural backgrounds. However, studies have shown that Japanese learners are not less autonomous than students of different nationalities (Holden & Usuki, 1999; MEXT, 2013). Findings from studies have revealed that learner-dependency was implicitly created by behavioral standards set by Japanese education institutions which do not nurture the capacity to develop autonomy which is particularly prevalent in elementary and secondary schools where there is a heavy focus on test scores (Holden & Usuki, 1999). Nevertheless, Benson (2011), claims that language learners have the natural ability to assume responsibility for their learning and any learner who lacks autonomy is capable of developing it.

Research has shown that social networking sites (SNS) offer new opportunities to language learners (Bax, 2011; Back, 2013; Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Reinhardt, 2019; Vandergrift, 2015). The interactive nature of these sites offers plenty of opportunities to interact with other speakers of the target language in a more authentic setting as learners have the chance to use the target language in informal and realistic ways, rather than in the structured nature of classroom teaching and learning. The flexible nature of online spaces also means that learners have the chance to access resources to the target language and engage in learning anywhere at any time. Thus, sharing content and information through online networks promotes participation and collaboration through interaction, engagement, and management of learning. To guarantee that students can benefit from participating in social networking spaces from a pedagogical standpoint, learning opportunities need to be created by educators where students have the chance to develop L2, facilitate engagement in the foreign language, increase motivation and exercise their autonomy to manage to learn at their own pace and style (Reinhardt, 2018; Schwienhorst, 2003; Reinders, 2010). Despite the language learning benefits that SNS afford, insights into how learners behave and exercise autonomy in digital spaces such as social networking sites are scarce. Most published work is focused on learning outcomes and the preference for how to design tasks rather than how learners engage and interact on these sites (Reinhardt, 2019; Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Peeters & Ludwig, 2017). This study described in this paper sought to understand the nature of a group of learners' participation in a tandem learning activity carried out on the social media platform, Facebook. The study focused on how self-directed learning was promoted. Analysis into ways of how learners interact in online spaces can inform researchers and language teachers on how to better design tasks to promote more specific learning objectives, better engage learners and develop learner agency and digital literacy which are said to go hand in hand with L2 development (Peeters, 2015). The following two questions related to the development of learner autonomy using social networking sites in pedagogy were explored:

1. What autonomous learning qualities were promoted by this project?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the Facebook project?

## **A Definition of Autonomy**

In the field of foreign language education, it has been argued that the development of autonomy in language learning, and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin (Little, 2004). Holec (1981) defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). He describes the physical attributes of an autonomous learner in that the learner is said to assume responsibility for all aspects of learning. Thus, an autonomous learner according to Holec (Little, 2004) determines what the content of learning is, discovers methods and techniques of how to learn, monitors the progression of the learning process, and assesses what has been acquired. Nevertheless, Little’s (1991) view describes autonomy from a psychological perspective where one has the mental capacity, such as the initiative, to learn something of interest, reflect on this learning, and make decisions as to the direction of learning. In summary, both Holec and Little describe an autonomous learner as one who takes the initiative and responsibility to carry out the learning process independently.

## **The Role of the Zone of Proximal Development**

Learner autonomy has often been widely discussed to be associated with the socio-cultural theory of learning where higher-order functions such as retention, development of ideas, and voluntary attentiveness are internalized through social interactions (Little, 2007). One of the central concepts of this framework is Vygotsky’s notion of zone of proximal development (ZPD), which professes the dialogic dynamic between a novice-expert relationship that is said to be characteristic of the natural development for language acquisition (Little, 2004). ZPD emphasizes the essence of learning by doing. It acknowledges the role of expertise in guiding the learning process and recognizes autonomy in a sense of being able to do something independently as a goal of learning (Little, 2004).

According to the theory, novice learners move along the ZPD from constant interaction with peers and seeking assistance from experts around them, eventually taking them from dependency to more self-regulation and autonomy through the new language. In other words, learning does not take place in isolation but rather through social collaboration and interaction, hence ‘learning’ takes place through the action of ‘doing’ (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Little, 2004). Consequently, interaction and collaboration with expert peers and teachers, serve to encourage learners to be more consciously aware of learning by using the target language as the medium to interact and collaborate for task performance, and for undertaking meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic reflection to develop target language proficiency which is integral to autonomy.

## **Tandem Learning**

From a pedagogical perspective, one of the ways in which the principles of learner autonomy and its social-interactive nature can be fostered is through tandem learning. Central to the practice of tandem learning is the principles of reciprocity and autonomy. Under the principle of reciprocity, learners have reciprocal dependence and mutual support for each other as they interact in tandem. The second important principle of tandem learning is the notion of autonomy. The learner is not only responsible for one’s own learning but also that of their partner. Thus, they determine what and when they want to learn independently and they can only expect the same level of

help and support from their partner according to what they provide and ask for (Little & Brammerts, 1996). According to Little and Brammerts (1996), in tandem learning, learners are cast into the roles of novice and expert simultaneously by being responsible for the other's learning through interactive and collaborative practice. Thus, learners are required to use the target language to collaborate and contribute to the interaction equally.

Furthermore, through interaction, and collaboration learners develop a sense of autonomy as they gain more practice and confidence in the target language. As tandem partners develop by enacting the roles of learner and competent speaker, so does the capacity to take more control of the learning process on their own (Little and Brammerts, 1996). Thus, autonomy grows as learners move through the process of collaborative practice, they become interdependent and responsible not only for their own learning but also for their partner.

Research in tandem learning through online collaboration on social networking sites has been shown in the literature to afford the promotion of learner autonomy in language learners. The social-interactive and collaborative nature of social networking sites have been seen as part of recent foreign language pedagogy not just for improving language proficiency but also as a tool for developing lifelong learning skills such as autonomy. McBride's study (2009) observed that as students develop communicative skills in online spaces, they commenced connecting more with other learners which subsequently leads to more opportunities to exercise autonomy. Accordingly, McBride described that the constant discourse of posting and responding through authentic interaction leads to unique interactivity and engagement that incentivized learners to become more involved in the learning process. This is similar to Peeters and Ludwig's (2017) findings in their analysis of peer collaboration in two networking case studies from a Facebook project. They concluded that taking part in the authentic construction of meaning and developing a sense of social presence promoted learners to apply metacognitive, social, and effective strategies to learning.

### **Asynchronous Tandem Efforts**

Asynchronous online studies have also been shown to be beneficial in assisting students to become autonomous language learners. A study by Sadler and Dooley (2016) illustrated that the performative process of tele-collaborative learning involved learners with mutual objectives to co-produce and share knowledge through a/synchronous communication technology. Compared to synchronous or real-time face-to-face interaction, asynchronous chats are regarded as less linguistically challenging as more statements are likely to be produced when learners are given the time and flexibility to think and consider language output.

Moreover, Ciftci and Savas' (2017) findings have discovered that learners were more likely to produce linguistically simple and short statements when interacting through asynchronous means compared to longer and more linguistically formal statements when using asynchronous tools. In addition, Avgousti's (2018) investigation of the use of asynchronous chats pointed out that they are more favored by learners as it gives them the flexibility and convenience to examine the problem and craft a response. Therefore, it can be argued that the use of asynchronous CMC takes away the pressure of having to formulate instant responses which may result in better quality and quantity of language output.

## Method

### The Facebook Project

The Facebook project described in this paper originated in the desire to provide learners with more authentic interaction in the target language. The project took place over the course of six weeks between an Australian and Japanese university. The timing was difficult to find due to clashes in academic schedules between the two universities. It was ultimately decided that the project would begin at the start of the Spring semester for the Japanese university which would fall in the middle of the semester for the Australian university. This decision was based on the Australian university incorporating the project as part of the course assessment. The Japanese university, on the other hand, did not have room in the course curriculum and implemented the project by recruiting volunteers from 1st-year courses as a pilot.

Facebook was chosen as the medium of communication and interaction. It was generally thought that both student populations were more familiar with and used Facebook compared to other social networking applications. Research by White (2009) illustrated how language learners who participated in an online tandem learning project increased their interactions on Facebook which is similar to a study by Socket (2011) who reported that English-language students at a French university used Facebook to communicate with speakers from the target language.

Participants in Australia were Japanese language learners and had a level of B1+ according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) while participants in Japan were English Language students. The participants in Japan had a score for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) that was between the range of 550 - 600. This is equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) English language proficiency level of A2-B1. At the start of the semester, instructors of both student populations (Australia and Japan) explained the concept of tandem language learning to the students and the details of the Facebook project. Students were given a short presentation on the project which included information about its duration, the expected level of participation, the language of choice, and information about the participating universities in Australia and Japan. Students were given some background on the nature of the Australian and Japanese students, mainly their history of learning the target language. There was a total of 88 students from the two cohorts and an equal number of students in each cohort. The Japanese students who showed some interest in participating in the project were encouraged to volunteer. Consequently, 44 students from three different 1<sup>st</sup> year listening and speaking workshop classes participated. Students who agreed to volunteer were instructed to create a Facebook account if they did not already have one.

The placement of students in groups was conducted by using a Google Form that asked students to choose three topics they are interested in from the following: arts, books, fashion, food, films, manga and anime, music, travel, and video games. Students were then placed in Facebook group topics respective to their top choice. There were between 8-10 members from each group. Group numbers were kept at an even number in the hope of ensuring a more balanced level of target language use. It was agreed by both the Australian and Japanese university teachers, that the Australian students would initiate the posts and keep all their writing in Japanese as this was part of a summative assessment for the course. The Japanese students were instructed to write their posts in the target

language (English); however, they were given the freedom to also write in Japanese should they prefer. Ultimately, both student populations were asked to interact in assigned groups by posting and commenting on their group's forum. Students were encouraged to upload pictures or short videos related to the topic that they have chosen, while also regularly contributing to their group's Facebook page. Finally, students were told that while teachers would be able to view the posts, they will not facilitate or contribute to them in any way other than to make short announcements regarding the project.

### Participants

The study described in this paper focuses on the Japanese cohort. A total of 44 students consisting of 18 males and 26 females who are first-year English majors volunteered for the project however, only 36 participants from the Japanese group completed the questionnaires. None of these participants have ever participated in online projects before. Participation was purely volunteer based; hence participants did not receive any credit or grade for their participation in the project.

### Data Collection and Analysis

To discover students' reactions to the project, a survey questionnaire was collected at the end of its conclusion. The questionnaire included a total of twelve questions, of which eight were quantitative and four were open-ended. There were four "yes" or "no" questions which were followed by open-ended questions that asked students to elaborate on their answers in the language of their choice. There were also four multiple-choice questions to discover participant motivations for volunteering and explore ways in which the project promoted autonomy. Due to the varying nature of students' language proficiency, the questionnaire was bilingual, and students were given the freedom to answer the open-ended parts of the survey in either language. This was also done to gain further insights into students' actions and perceptions of the project. Japanese responses to the open-ended questions were translated by the author. The translations were confirmed by a professor who is competent in Japanese for confirmation and reliability.

Quantitative data were collected and analyzed using an excel spreadsheet. Participants' responses significant to answering the research questions in the study were calculated represented in percentage amounts. Open-ended responses from the survey were analyzed via thematic analysis to recognize the main issues and emergent themes. These were identified, analyzed, and summarized to answer the research questions.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Results of Quantitative Data**

There are six questions from the survey that are significant in evaluating the impact of this project on promoting learner autonomy in the Japanese student population. Data were analyzed to gain an understanding into participants' autonomous actions. In determining whether participants engaged in autonomous learning, their motivation for volunteering in the project, the number of times they took the initiative to check their tandem

group's posts, created posts, commented on other group members posts, and sought help from the project instructor were analyzed. The six questions that are significant to the research questions are 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Table 1 exhibits quantitative data collected for the questions.

Table 1. Quantitative Results

Quantitative Survey Questions n=36	(%)
Q3. What were your motivations for participating in this project?	
My friends joined.	11%
I would like to improve my English skills.	28%
I would like to make more friends	25%
I would like to know more about the interests of other people.	8%
I am curious about foreign people's thoughts and ideas.	28%
Q4. How often did you check the Facebook group for new posts?	
1-2 times a week	61%
2-3 times a week	2%
3-4 times a week	6%
everyday	31%
Q5. Did you make any posts?	
Yes	44%
No	56%
Q6. Did you comment on other students' posts?	
Yes	58%
No	42%
Q7. Did you seek help from your teacher?	
Yes	75%
No	25%
Q8. Would you like to participate in this project again?	
Yes	83%
No	17%

Question 3 asked participants what their motivation was for participating in the project. Results from the data collected exhibit students' willingness for volunteering in the project including the desire to improve target language skills (39%), establish friendships (36%), and curiosity about other people's thoughts and ideas (33%). It is important to also indicate that there are differences between male and female responses with female participants showing much higher levels of motivation compared to the male cohort.

Question 4 asked how often students checked their respective Facebook groups for new posts. More than 60% of the students checked their corresponding groups every day while just over 30% checked their groups only once or twice a week. This is reflected in the open-ended responses which revealed that students were curious to find out and looked forward to reading what other students have posted on their group's page or commented on their posts and as a result, checked their Facebook groups regularly. It is also interesting to point out that most students who indicated that they viewed their Facebook groups daily were the same group of students who were actively

writing posts and comments while the others who did not post or comment as much did not demonstrate as much participation.

Question 5 asked whether students made any posts in their respective Facebook groups. Students who did not post at all (56%) were greater than students who did contribute a post (44%). Respondents who explained their lack of participation in the open-ended section indicated that the reasons for not making posts were due to a lack of knowledge of the topic area, with many reporting that while it was interesting to read what others have written and would like to contribute something in return, it was their lack of confidence in not knowing enough about the topic that held them back from sharing anything in return. Furthermore, participants emphasized the lack of knowledge on how to use Facebook contributed to their lack of participation. Participants in the 56% cohort who could not post expressed their desire to share something with their group members but did not know how to use Facebook's posting functions. Finally, participants' self-consciousness held them back from posting even though they had the initial desire to participate in the project, and interest in the topic. Participants indicated that they were conscious of what others might think of what they have written, and their language proficiency, which caused them anxiety and stopped some of them from sharing.

Question 6 asked whether students commented on any posts. More than half of the participants (58%) wrote comments on other students' posts, while 42% did not. It is important to note that although participants indicated that they commented on others' posts, the majority of the comments were mostly very short with some acknowledging one's input and expressing an impression of the post by writing "That's great!", "Awesome", or "Wow" and some were simply giving silent feedback through 'Likes'. Consequently, participants' responses to their willingness to comment were that they wanted to commend other group members' efforts in creating posts, provide positive reinforcement by showing appreciation for others' input, motivate other participants to post more often, and provide effective support to enjoy online collaboration.

Question 7 asked whether students sought any help from the instructor during the project. 75% of the students asked for help from the instructor regarding various aspects of the project such as to confirm the requirements of participation – how often they should look at the Facebook group, in what manner to post or comment, how much to write in a post, and in what language they should use to interact with the Australian students effectively. Furthermore, only a handful of participants enquired about the use of Facebook functions to be able to participate and contribute to their Facebook group page.

Finally, Question 8 asked whether students would participate in this project again if given the opportunity. Most of the students (83%) indicated that they would be interested to volunteer in the project again in the future. Responses from open-ended questions revealed that participants had generally positive experiences with most citing that the interaction and collaboration online transferred to friendships, increased confidence, and motivation of using the target language in online spaces as well as recognition of gaps in their learning. Furthermore, participants who could not actively participate during the project expressed regret that they were not able to put in as much effort as they had initially intended to due to lack of time and lack of Facebook technical know-how. Hence, many expressed that they would like to have a do-over to improve their project performance if given the

chance in the future.

### **Analysis of Open-ended Questions**

Results from open-ended questions showed that several autonomous learning attributes were demonstrated during the project. There were some themes that were expected such as participants possessing intrinsic motivation, reciprocity, and reflection on learning. On the other hand, there were some emergent themes which were not expected such as gained interest in culture and becoming more interculturally aware. Other unexpected themes included the importance of task design and difficulty of navigating with the medium of technology chosen for the project.

#### *A Sense of Community Enhanced Intrinsic Motivation*

Volunteering in the project alone seemed to increase the students' intrinsic motivation. From the aforementioned quantitative data, most participants volunteered due to their desire to improve target language skills, make friends with people living overseas, and proclivity toward other people's thoughts and ideas. The project also increased this motivation further as a result of implicit encouragement triggered by examples of what other students were setting from their posts. Participants explained that they were inspired to post or comment after reading what others have written and seeing their efforts. One participant reported that "Many people posted so many great things" and as a result, "learned a lot" and wanted to say to show appreciation for doing a "great job writing (in) Japanese." Another student specified that they "...liked what the Australian student posted" because it was something that they were also interested in, which consequently prompted them to share their thoughts on the same topic. Furthermore, the intrinsic motivation to interact was encouraged by the desire to establish relationships with people in the target language as reported by a student from the music group: "We were interested in the same type of music, and I liked how they like Japanese groups too so I wanted to become friends." Rovai (2002) suggested that the willingness to share information, provide support, and encouragement of collaborative efforts increase in online spaces such as Facebook as they provide a strong sense of belonging in a community. This is also similar to findings by Kok (2008) who argues that virtual communities create a sense of belongingness as they provide opportunities for learners to interact, learn and work collaboratively which are important for enhancing the learning experience of students. In the dynamics of web 2.0, forming a community of practice is conducive to interaction and engagement which is linked to autonomy.

#### *Initiative to Reciprocate*

Seeing the effort and contributions of other peer members led participants to want to invest in the group posts as much as the others. During the initial stages of the project, Japanese participants reported that they were reluctant to post, and waited for their Australian counterparts to begin posting. However, as the project progressed over time, they saw the effort and the level of input that their Australian peers were contributing and this encouraged them to share in return as a way to show their appreciation and support of those students. For instance, a student from the group discussing films stated, "I wanted to say good job for writing so good (well) in Japanese, so I

wrote a comment". This corroborates with Koch's (2017) third dimension of reciprocity which he termed 'discursive', which states that to accomplish interactions, the interlocutors in tandem adapt to each other in various ways. Furthermore, reciprocity can also be seen in students who made conscious efforts to write their comments in the interlocutor's target language or for clarifying expressions incorrectly used in the target language. Cappellini and Rivens Mompean (2015) argue that this aspect of reciprocity is pivotal as learners ascertain a learning need or learning goal which they pursue with a native speaker. For instance, a participant from the music group revealed that when an Australian participant wrote a comment in English, he supported the comment by writing in Japanese and vice versa as they became conscious of their group member's language goals stating that "My Australian partner said she needs to write in Japanese as much as possible to get a good grade, so I wrote back (to) her in Japanese."

### *The Project Promoted Reflection on Learning*

Along with making a conscious effort to reciprocate with group members, responses further displayed how interaction on Facebook encouraged many students to explore various ways of improving target language skills and to share their language learning experiences. One of the pedagogical principles in the development of learner autonomy according to David Little (2004) is that a learner should reflect on one's learning at a macro and micro level. According to Little (2004), it is important for learners to be able to evaluate their relationship to the learning process by identifying their strengths and weaknesses which grow out of ongoing interaction. Reports by participants indicated reflective learning practices such as observation of the experience and reflecting on it. Japanese learners evaluated their experiences and considered the areas of improvement that they felt was necessary for development.

A study by Solmaz (2017) into the use of Twitter amongst autonomous language learners indicated that Twitter provided a space for learners to reflect on target language learning experiences. For instance, a student who was in the travel group stated that after developing an interest in a place they "heard from another group member encouraged" them to investigate that specific place further by "finding YouTube videos and reading travel websites." Thus, reading other students' input on the group's forums promoted students to take the initiative to inquire on how to gain further language input. Moreover, the inability to participate due to lack of time and knowledge of how to use Facebook prompted others to reflect on their performance overall. Responses such as "If I could have another chance to participate, I would be more proactive" and "It was hard to comment when someone had already started a conversation. Next time, I would like to start the conversation." illustrates reflection on one's participation and engagement during the project. The desire to want a do-over is reflective of students' motivation for learning and interaction.

Participants also revealed in their responses that they became more concerned with writing concisely and grammatically as they read what others have written. Reading their tandem group members' input prompted more initiative to focus on form as they write. Because other students read their posts, students became more conscious of what they are writing subsequently focusing on the structure and grammar. Participants stated that things such as "My Australian group members' Japanese were really great" and "I tried very hard to write something good

because they could do it” show participants’ emphasis on focusing on language form. Schwienhorst (2003) specifies the social interactive nature of tandem learning is conducive to reflection. He asserts that asynchronous writing plays a vital role in developing reflective, interactive, and experiential learning which are associated with autonomy. That is to say that by going through the writing process, learners have the chance to develop their writing in the target language by having the opportunity to inspect and review their ideas.

### *Intercultural Awareness*

An unexpected theme that emerged from participant responses obtained from an open-ended questionnaire included intercultural awareness. Japanese students discovered that some of the participants from the Australian group were not from an Australian background. A Japanese student from the food group proclaimed that she was surprised that “not all people in Australia are Aussies” which “was very interesting for me.” Another student from the music group reported that she “learned about Vietnamese dishes because my partner is Australian-Vietnamese” and that her partner “taught her about the Vietnamese food culture.” Such reports illustrate how the project provided a platform for intercultural exchange. Raluy and Szymanska-Czaplak (as cited in Tardieu and Horgues, 2020) emphasise that online collaborative practices seem well-positioned to build students’ intercultural competence. Online collaborative practices such as this Facebook project provides a window of opportunity for learners to look observe, analyse, interpret, and relate to those outside of their culture. Tandem learning provides a window to others’ way of thinking that encourages openness, curiosity, and discovery and shapes people’s attitudes (Raluy and Szymanska-Czaplak as cited in Tardieu and Horgues, 2020). Subsequently, the Facebook project seemed to have given a window for Japanese participants to look outward. Students revealed that as they read more of what their Australian counterparts posted, they felt closer and developed more interest in the specific cultural topics that were discussed on their group’s pages. For instance, a student from the manga and anime group stated that through discussion of manga they “could learn about other people’s culture and deepen (my) ties with them.” A study conducted by Aydin (2012) concluded that SNS like Facebook could provide a valuable educational environment, especially in regards to learning about cultures. Furthermore, students were excited to discover cultural similarities and differences, and mentioned that “there was someone I (had) similar interest with” and “watched the same anime a lot”. One student commented that she “enjoyed reading” about the cultural differences between Japan and other countries, adding that “I looked forward to reading about the differences as they were very interesting (things) I did not know about (before)”. Raluy and Szymanska (as cited in Tardieu and Horgues, 2020) highlight that interacting with partners from different cultural backgrounds promotes intercultural sensitivity as people learn to acknowledge cultural differences.

### *Task-Design*

Another issue that arose in the study includes the relationship between task design and student performance. Many students pointed out that although they had the motivation to participate in the study, they were not able to participate as much as they had intended to due to the nature of how the tasks were designed. Several students reported that they would like to have “more group members in the group next time” and those others felt their groups were limiting as “there were not enough people in one group.” Furthermore, there were participants who

reported that they “would like to participate in different topics” suggesting that it would have been better if they were allowed to participate in the other groups so that they could have posted more since “if you (didn’t) don’t know enough about” the topic, “it was hard to post anything.” Student reports corroborate with a study by Hauk and Youngs (2008) who argued that participation in oral/aural synchronous learning does not necessarily result in meaningful and motivated language learners. They emphasize that simply participating in online collaborative projects does not necessarily translate to successful exchanges unless tasks are well-constructed.

### *Medium*

The choice of social networking medium also affected the participation of most Japanese students. There are participants who reported that they “don’t use FB very much so I (I’d) rather use Instagram or LINE when it comes to joining a community and talking with others online.” Further, others indicated that “FB is not popular with Japanese people” so the project should have been “run on LINE”. Consequently, the lack of training and knowledge on how to use Facebook by Japanese participants negatively affected the level of interaction and collaboration on group pages as a result. Such finding coincides with Blattner and Lomica’s (2012) investigation into students’ view of the integration of Facebook into the language curriculum indicates that familiarity with technology does not necessarily mean that learners would know how to take advantage of online tools and resources, particularly web 2.0 tools. Thus, their study calls for guidance from teachers to facilitate and guide students through the learning process.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated how a web 2.0 tool such as Facebook could foster learner autonomy amongst EFL learners in a Japanese university. The study contained two research questions to explore learners’ perspectives on the project and their participation was analyzed to see whether they engaged in self-directed learning. Findings revealed that students’ perception of the project was generally positive with many indicating that they would like to have the opportunity to participate again. A great majority of the students also expressed how the project helped them forge interpersonal relationships with students from the target language. Nonetheless, there were reports of dissatisfaction with the design of the project tasks. Students felt that restricting participation in one group forum and discussing one topic hindered the level of interaction and discouraged socialization with the other students. Among suggestions to improve this type of project, students expressed the wish for LINE application to be used instead of Facebook as a preferred social networking application. According to Statista, the rate of usage of Facebook in Japan is low compared to online applications such as LINE, Twitter, or Instagram (Statista, 2021). Research by Statista in 2021 showed that the penetration rate of LINE is 80% and that more than 90% of people between the ages of 13 and 19 use LINE as the main form of communication online. Furthermore, some students indicated that they would like teachers to provide them with more task structure and to receive more guidance to help them compose posts and to be able to comment on other students’ writing.

In relation to the research question of whether autonomy was exercised, analysis of open-ended responses showed that students implicitly took control of learning by interacting and collaborating with tandem group members.

Participants in the study reflected on their language use and overall performance. Those who participated consistently throughout the project made conscious efforts to focus on language form when composing posts and writing comments in the target language. Participants who were not as consistent in engagement and participation expressed regret for the lack of participation and would like to have another chance.

Moreover, it can also be seen from the study that participants already possessed intrinsic motivation from volunteering for the project. Intrinsic motivation is one of the main components of self-directed learning and according to Ushioda (2000), learners' intrinsic motivation and the principles of tandem learning- reciprocity and learner autonomy – have a corresponding relationship. Further, the intrinsic motivational learning process in tandem learning is said to fundamentally shape autonomous learning characteristics of developmental and experiential learning. Thus, taking the initiative to post and comment shows student engagement with tandem partners and experimentation with language are autonomous learning qualities.

Finally, one of the attributes of tandem learning is reciprocity which is one of the tenets of autonomy. Students expressed their appreciation of their group members' input by making a conscious effort to put up posts and comment on their Australian partners' posts in Japanese instead of the target language, English. Furthermore, as Japanese participants became more aware of their Australian counterparts' language learning goals, they took the initiative to support them by posting and commenting on the group's Facebook page. Little and Brammerts (1996) confirm this as successful learning in tandem which is when learners mutually invest as much time and effort in preparation and support of learning.

## **Implications**

- The pedagogical implications that this study has brought up include
- Well-constructed tasks are vital to the success of the achievement of the desired learning outcome. Educators need to ensure that tasks are appropriate to the medium and take into account the affordances, constraints, and possibilities for making learning meaningful.
- Combining technology and pedagogy to encourage learners to reflect not just after the activity but throughout the course of the activity. Schwienhorst (2003) prescribes the pressures, affordances, and potentials of using technology and pedagogy for reflective processes. Synchronous or asynchronous environments need to provide both teachers and students with the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate the learning processes for effective reflection as we cannot expect learners to know how to reflect and carry out reflection on their own. Guidance and support including learner training are essential for critical reflection (Schwienhorst, 2003).
- Foreign language classrooms need to embed intercultural awareness and communicative competence skills to cultivate students to be more open-minded and adapt to ever-changing global environments. According to Byram (1997) being an intercultural communicator means developing communicative skills and attitudes that are necessary for understanding and for relating to people from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, having cultural knowledge of other cultures is no longer sufficient in today's globalized world, and developing intercultural competence is a lifelong learning process and cannot be acquired in a short time. Online virtual exchanges such as tandem language and culture learning can arguably play an important role in preparing

students for global citizenship.

- Using online tools appropriately and embedding them into the foreign language curricula. According to Akbari et al (2016), there are two components of student engagement. The amount of effort and time that students spend on learning and how institutions organize, and create learning environments. We can infer that institutions have the responsibility to ensure that they provide conditions for learning where students' minds are stimulated and engaged. To this end, education institutions should encourage the development of lifelong learning skills such as autonomy. Research has shown that tandem learning requires that learners take control of the learning process. In other words, tandem learning takes a learner-centered approach to learning as it provides learners the opportunity to select the content of the activity, exercise, plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning as well as take responsibility for their tandem partner's as well.

## **Limitations**

This study was conducted based on a small sample size which is not representative of all Japanese foreign language learners. A larger sample size such as recruiting all first-year students to participate in the study would give researchers a better understanding of the development of learner autonomy from this tandem learning project. Moreover, some questions about how participants found topics to post about, how they went about writing posts, and the level of collaboration among group members would have given the researcher more insights into student engagement. In addition, pre-assessment of autonomy and post-assessment would give a better understanding and picture of student autonomy which would further substantiate the benefit of using Facebook to promote autonomy. Finally, triangulation of data by interviewing participants from various levels of engagement would give the study deeper insights into the reasons for interaction and the kinds of autonomous acts that they got involved in that are unknown to the researcher. For instance, interviewing those participants who stopped participating during the project and those who participated right to the end of the project.

## **Notes**

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