Learning that doesn’t label what ‘kind’ of autonomy is appropriate

Stacey Vye with Andy Barfield & Androulla Athanasiou

Stacey Vye has been teaching English in Japan and learning about the experience for over 20 years. She is currently an Assistant Professor at Saitama University and has been a Teachers College (TC) Columbia Teaching Assistant to Nanci Graves in the Fostering Autonomy in Language Learning course and other courses since 2006. Her research interests are reflection, learner and teacher autonomy in language education, especially the connections between both.

In this interview Stacey talks about her work in the English Resource Centre within the Centre for English Education and Development (CEED) at Saitama University in Japan. Unlike better-known self-access centres in Japan and Hong Kong, the ERC at Saitama University is small scale and is run by a handful of teachers who are forever trying to secure budgetary support. The interview was carried out over email between March and July 2010, and Stacey starts by walking us through her university into the ERC.

Andy: Stacey, can you walk us into the building and up the stairs and into ERC, and give the readers of Independence a sense of what is where, and how big the ERC is and so on?

Stacey: Sure, Andy—we are located on the second floor above the Saitama University administration offices, so most students can easily find us if they receive flyers, a short orientation from our faculty, or hear about us by word of mouth from other students. Just in case we cannot be found, my colleague Leander Hughes worked with a group of students to produce a video that creatively highlights how to get to the ERC. In the video, the students start walking from the largest landmark on campus, a green statue—which is supposed to resemble a green rabbit—to the door of our center. The musical score is original and is featured here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgtTTDpQy-4&feature=player_embedded (Directions to the Saitama University English Resource Center—ERC).

Walking up the stairs and round the corner, then down the hallway in the direction of the ERC can be a bit surprising (but hopefully memorable) for the first time because we are located in a newly renovated building with energy-efficient lighting. That means the lights turn on for a few minutes in the hallway as you walk under the sensors, which makes it difficult to make out objects and figures from far away in a dimly lit hallway. You then see a sign in Japanese half way down the hallway leading to the ERC that reads Anything about English Consultation Room: The English Education and Development Resource Center (ERC). Perhaps that is why we have sometimes received very specific English questions or broad goal statements from first-time visitors, such as How do I get into Harvard University? or Stacey please transcribe the movie The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian or I want to improve my English. Please help it.

As you enter the rectangular-shaped room, you will see that the longer wall is all glass on the hallway side, with large windows opposite and on looking a beautiful grove of trees outdoors. The room has five clusters of sitting areas that can accommodate about 30 people, with one of the areas housing our three computers. There are large posters from movies, musical bands, travel scenes, and flags of a variety of countries along wall space that is not covered with shelves for our resources. All in all, we like to think that it is a place that helps reduce the anxiety visitors may have when they come here for the first time.

Andy: Who are some of the people coming into the ERC, and what do they do there? And what do you and your colleagues do to support them in their learning and development?

Stacey: Well, on a typical day during the opening hours of 3:00 to 5:00 pm, in the ERC we usually get between 15 to 25 students dropping in for a while as their schedules allow, and on almost every day of the week there are two teachers to work with the crew. The three colleagues I work with are Adriana Edwards Wurzinger, the faculty coordinator, Leander Hughes, and Nathan Krug, and they all agree that the atmosphere is cozy enough that some
students say, ‘I’m home!’ when they come in. Because we focus on what the learners ask us to help them with, rather than keeping the advising to a certain range of activities, students come to the ERC for almost anything related to English that you can think of.

Although about half of the students come to practise English communication and/or socialize, some Japanese and international exchange students join us to try to get over the sense of loneliness they have after entering the university and before they have started making friends. Others join for various specific purposes. At any rate, it is sometimes hard to tell why the remaining half attend despite keeping self-report records, but in general some students come to borrow our resources, including DVDs, graded readers, books on various subjects graded by TOEIC bands, English study guides, support for TOEIC and TOEFL tests, and English games. Others ask for feedback and advice on their papers, scholarship applications, English job interviews, letters of recommendation, studying abroad, and English homestays—and we even get the occasional request about how to enter Harvard, Oxford, or other prestigious universities (that is the toughest request for me!).

Twice a week we also hold two workshops that are approximately two hours each. One is a drama workshop, where Adriana helps students put on their own amazing large-scale drama productions, and which is now an official non-credit class after seven productions; the other is a workshop that I do to help English Education and Liberal Arts majors prepare for various Boards of Education English-speaking interviews for their teaching licenses. Oh, and I almost forgot: a few students may come to the ERC simply to use our computers or to have free coffee, tea, and light snacks (but we like to think they come for other reasons to do with English!).

**Andy:** What are some of the challenges that you have faced in setting up the ERC and developing it so far?

**Stacey:** I wasn’t teaching at Saitama University when the ERC opened, but according to Adriana, the faculty had secured, on a shoestring budget, a small classroom, which they were then briefly shifted out of into a portable room in a far corner of the campus. The teachers themselves donated books, teaching resources, English videos, furniture and posters in both rooms to get the ERC started. So, funding has been a challenge since the outset, and we still actively write grant applications, to secure further financing of the ERC. In 2006 we faced another challenge when, with some intense planning, organizing, and negotiating, the Center for English Education and Development (CEED) was able to move the ERC into its own state-of-the-art electricity and water-saving smart room. Even in our current location, we still display donated art; along with some thriving plants, which give a feeling of warmth, the pieces of art also help create for our students a place not only where they can use English, but where they can also make lasting friendships. Recently we got rid of unused clutter to free up a lot of space after consulting with the students about how they would like the different spaces in the ERC to be used.

Another challenge for me has been the noise level on the high-traffic days of 25+ people visiting the ERC. If too many groups of people are speaking at once and one of the teachers is helping a student on a report, it can become difficult to concentrate. We are currently looking for a tutorial room for private and/or small-group consultations, but, in the meantime, I kindly encourage people to sit down while they are chatting, instead of standing and sometimes shouting across the room (in a jovial way, of course); that seems to help reduce the noise level. On the other hand, I guess we are lucky that we have such a high volume of students coming to use the ERC!

**Andy:** It really sounds like a very welcoming and supportive environment for you, your colleagues and the students. What are your goals for trying to develop the ERC further? And what resources (both material and human) would help you get to your goals?

**Stacey:** When the four of us had an impromptu goal session during some down time this past February, Adriana sketched out a design layout and facilitated as we contributed to what we can capitalize on and what we might do away with to create these new spaces for growth. We are ready to develop the popular personal and group consultations further. Although we are not yet able to currently use an online system for sign-ups, we are in the process of revamping the pre-consultation forms to get a clearer picture of what students would like help with, and which teacher can best facilitate (the Self-Access Centre tour in Hong Kong at ILA2009 gave us some great ideas!). And speaking of humans, Andy, ideally we would love to have more teachers involved in the ERC in the future, too!

On another note, we have increased our personal consultation hours of availability from
four to six a week, and physically created a clearer reception area and a separate consultation space to work in, away from the main flow of traffic comprised of students who like to work in more of a conversational setting. Regarding the resources students borrow, we have found that we housed many resources that physically took up space and were not being borrowed. This was primarily due to the content and level of the material, but to a lesser extent, the materials that were being borrowed were not prominently displayed until recently. So, we have freed up space for resources no longer needed and work on opening up 'English relaxation or work stations'. Maybe we can work on name-branding of those areas, too.

Lastly, as for the material goals, we have secured one large, and two modest (and greatly appreciated) grants to feed into our human goals:
* two computers to replace the well-used and loved old one that is turning into the little engine that can't
* resources that support the various study abroad programmes aboard they are hoping to participate in
* more popular DVDs of movies based on books and graded readers, with audio CDs
* more TOEFL support resources and test preparation software for the many students who aim to study in various countries abroad.

**Andy:** When you look out beyond the ERC, what are some points of reference in terms of theory for your practice?

**Stacey:** Hmm, there are two researchers among others, whose work on teaching and learning resonates with me in terms of what I practise as a teacher. They both helped me strengthen these beliefs through reading their ideas and speaking with them in person. First of all, Fanselow (1999) reminds me (and in many meetings with him since then) that, whatever learning gains we acquire becomes a change in our lives, yet there is a tension in education between change and stability. As a teacher in the ERC, I want to change my teaching and want my students to change, yet I want some stability in using familiar practices that I find valuable for the students and myself to learn. The tension/balance between these opposites helps make teaching exciting for me to explore the possibilities, without hopefully not overly confusing my students or myself.

Secondly, Brown (2003) asks and describes how it is possible to develop a flexible approach to autonomy in language learning that doesn’t label what ‘kind’ of autonomy is appropriate for a certain cultural group—that doesn’t deny potential in what certain learners can and cannot do, and that allows for differing perspectives between different learners and teachers. I have to say what an important idea it is to be flexible in our teaching so that we do not deny learning to any learner. For me, Brown’s flexible definition is refreshing because it doesn’t prescribe a certain kind of learner to a particular ‘remedy,’ which can cut off potential learning experiences.

**Andy:** Stacey, I’d also like to ask you about the ‘knots’. What are some of the contradictions (in terms of autonomy) that you see in the work that you (and/or the students) are doing in the ERC?

**Stacey:** Tough and interesting question Andy! I feel like some of the developing challenges that the teachers and myself are facing since we have opened could be considered contradictions or knots. If we are aware of the knots, I think we are then able to loosen them and deal with reality. That’s because we are able to talk about improvements due to the fact we have taken the time to build up a level of trust in the past year or so where we listen to each other to come to heightened understandings. That’s been our starting point for teacher autonomy (I won’t define it here because it is forming now).

Another knot does concern noise as previously mentioned. The students in the ERC request speaking practice, so when many groups of people are speaking at the same time in one room, the noise issue is sometimes a constraint, so beyond the superficial remedy of asking students to sit down as they chat to reduce noise or to keep the volume down, we have a knot: please speak/please be quiet, it’s a contradiction, right? Because of this paradox, we have re-thought spatial arrangements, and this has freed up spaces to speak in the room. This, as I have mentioned, has involved building trust amongst the teachers by letting each other know what we are thinking, remembering the ERC vision, while seeking to understand each other’s points of view in order to spatially view the room differently and let go of some resources and furniture that are rarely used or no longer serve a function for our vision. These actions in turn have also helped us realize to be careful about what donations we receive and what kind of grant applications we write for funding. If the resources don't serve a purpose, then why accept them or write applications for them in the first place?

As for knots concerning a few of the students, I wonder if some of their goals are
unrealistic or the ways they are trying to reach their goals may be futile. In other words, I feel that perhaps the way or ways they are trying to learn the English language may actually be hindering what goals they want to accomplish. Under these circumstances, as I do with my fellow teaching faculty, I try to listen and seek to understand first in order to come to greater understandings about what the students want. These actions sometimes help me to shift my own preconceived notions about what may be best for the student and/or their situation. I can then try to come to mutual understandings with the students about how they can come closer to what goals they want to accomplish.

Andy: Stacey, thanks for talking us through things so far. Androulla has just joined the interview and wanted to ask you something if that’s OK.

Androulla: Stacey, hi, you briefly mention Brown’s (2003) flexible approach to autonomy and comment that you agree with it. I was wondering how you see the question of whether the ERC promotes or develops autonomy for the learners and/or how the ERC staff hope to promote autonomy. I felt that the notion of autonomy is implied in what you have said so far, but it is not completely explicit. Could you draw it in slightly stronger lines for us?

Stacey: Thank you for asking, Androulla. I have felt for a long time that one of the starting points for our Centre for facilitating autonomy is Brown’s (2003) flexible approach since our Centre teachers’ learning and teaching experiences are diverse, and the students who visit us come from different faculties and are literally encouraged to come and ask us about anything related to English. For these reasons, many different minds congregate in a small area, so focusing on interacting, supporting, learning from each other and coming to agreements about what learner autonomy is and isn’t (see Little, 1991) seems to be a community-building component in the ERC that works well for us.

In this space, we also need to work together with the students on their language needs, which reminds me of Edith Esch’s work (2009) on the conceptual distortions and discursive dissonances between individual personal autonomy (crash) and critical socially situated autonomy (clash) —that is a tension for genuine dialogues to be discussed under the wider umbrella of autonomy theory. For our Centre we need the tension a bit on the clash side not to exclude individual cognition with learners. That’s so we can focus more on the whole community approach of socially situated autonomy. In turn, that helps learners and teachers to support more learning gains for learners on their terms, and, at the same time, it also helps keep us teachers sane: we would not want to foster exclusive individualism in the small ERC quarters as that might create a lot of little princes and princesses crashing about and clashing into each other.

Lastly, our Centre is relatively young, and the current core teachers have only begun to work at the same facility in the past two to five years, so we are constantly growing. My dream would be to mirror not the Helsinki University Language Centre (ALMS), but rather their philosophy, as described by Kjisik (2007), as it seems analogous to our possible future direction because of the collaborative approach that we have:

Our research has highlighted the necessity for creating, in collaboration with learners, an authentic community of autonomy. All parties should experience a sense of ownership of that community and of the learning process, which is its primary aim. The quality of dialogue between the members is also critical. Encounters between teachers and learners should aspire to be reciprocal, un-preconceived and authentic dialogues (Kjisik, 2007: 125).

References

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