Student Autonomy and Empowerment in Japanese Learning?
A Case Study of Tutoring Activities[1]

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Abstract

Ca' Foscari University of Venice provides peer tutoring services mediating between classroom and independent learning while also reviewing class content to prevent test failures, drop-outs, and late graduations. Grounded in critical and transformative education, this study investigates the significance and challenges of promoting autonomy to peer tutoring in language acquisition as a tool for social change and citizenship formation, as it has not been given sufficient attention. The case study involves small groups of bachelor's first-year Japanese language students who attended 12 online weekly meetings and engaged in active learning of Japanese grammar through worksheets and discussions, also using specific online tools developed by the Department of Asian and North African Studies. Relying on a qualitative thematic analysis involving four semi-structured interviews, findings show students' discomfort and limited awareness of their autonomy, as well as dependency on the teacher/tutor and the institution. However, results also revealed their attitude towards collaborative learning and their expectations for tutoring activities, displaying a sense of competition between peers. In conclusion, employing a critical and transformative approach to peer tutoring, while not enough to stimulate empowering critical reflection, is nonetheless meaningful in educators' commitment to create opportunities for critical assessment of knowledge transmission. This analysis confirms previous results and hints at challenges for educators and institutions in applying critical pedagogies to tutoring, such as institutional barriers and students' expectations, while underlying a positive attitude toward the offered new studying-model as well.

Keywords: *critical pedagogy, language education, peer tutoring, student autonomy, Japanese language learning, collaborative learning*

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1. Introduction

According to the Survey Report on Japanese Language Education Abroad 2021 by the Japan Foundation, in Western Europe 1,061 institutions offer Japanese language courses, employing 2,944 teachers and enrolling 89,530 students. Most learners study Japanese at the higher education level. The countries with the most institutions, teachers, and students are France, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany, followed by Italy, with 73 offering Bachelor's degrees majoring in Japanese studies. Italy has the second highest number of students within Higher Education in this context, amounting to 6583. Within these institutions, Ca' Foscari University of Venice stands out with other prominent centres for Japanese studies, such as SOAS, London, and INALCO, Paris, but also in the Italian context, offering a Bachelor's programme specialising in Japanese language and culture and comprising 1500 hours of Japanese language over three years, with additional optional classes. This equals 60 ECTS over the 180 (approximately 33%) required for students to graduate. 1 ECTS corresponds to approximately 25-30 hours of study, resulting in a significant investment in time and energy.

The program requires students to earn 18 ECTS in Japanese language over a total of 60 ECTS required for the first year. Consequently, Japanese language corresponds to nearly 30% of the first-year credits and equivalent to 450 hours of study, divided between classroom and out of classroom learning. Classes comprehend writing, speaking, grammar and reading drills conducted by Foreign Language Experts, usually native speakers. The approach reflects a structural orientation to language teaching, emphasising memorization and repetition, as the employed textbook (Shin Bunka Shokyū Nihongo, 2007) offers minimal instructions, exercises, or self-reflection prompts. Within this framework, peer tutoring for Japanese language students responds to institutional requirements to prevent test failures, drop-outs, and late graduations.

While peer tutoring has been previously associated with a complementary role in Higher Education contexts to promote responsibility and autonomy from both educational and occupational perspectives (Torre, 2006), in practice, peer tutoring sessions in this context are aimed at revising class content through frontal explanation and grammar drills. Additionally, pre-existing research (Bussu & Contini, 2023) suggests the possibility for mentoring practices, which by definition have a broader scope than tutoring, to potentially create an opportunity for students to become active and agentive learners whilst building a sense of community. This research, drawing on critical language pedagogy and dialogic Japanese language educational approaches of Hosokawa (2008) and Mariotti (2017), envisions the tutor as a 'guide on the side' of the learning process and technology as a tool for students to take responsibility and emancipate themselves from the teacher and the institution and become autonomous learners (Benson, 2013). It addresses the gap in applying a critical and transformative framework to peer tutoring in Japanese language education in Higher Education whilst contributing to understanding potential institutional barriers, delving into the possibility of engaging students in autonomy. Autonomy can be framed within a transformative nuance, as represented by Raya &Vieira (2021), underscoring the importance of critical awareness and social responsibility, empowering learners to make self-determined decisions and become more active in their learning and social roles. Education is seen as a means of collective empowerment, interpreted as a collective action towards social integration and the creation of a more just society (Zimmermann, 2000) through shared co-responsibility between peers and teachers (Mariotti, 2020). While the framework outlined

above may encourage little to no autonomy in language learning, what happens when peer tutoring practices strive to stimulate such skills within a critical and transformative framework?

2. Methodology

Tutoring sessions

The case study examines peer tutoring activities for first-year Bachelor's degree Japanese language students at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The selection of tutoring sessions as a case study stems from their unique nature as peer-to-peer services without a teacher. The first-year course is divided into two semesters, each consisting of 15 weeks of classes and an online test in January/February. The course requires 450 hours of study (18 ECTS) for the first year, divided into classroom learning (180 hours) and independent study (45 hours per semester).

Tutoring sessions were conducted weekly online via the Zoom platform from September to December, consisting of 12 sessions of 1.5 hours each. The tutor was required to complete 30 hours of work, including group sessions, material preparation, and individual sessions if needed. Attendance varied, with a maximum of 32 participants initially and a minimum of 4 by the end of the semester, out of over 250 enrolled students. The methodology used for the tutoring sessions was developed and shared between the authors, respectively the tutor and the course coordinator, with weekly feedback sessions to evaluate and improve the practices.

In 2024, Ca' Foscari student population comprised 984 students majoring in Japanese language programs, with 678 in the Bachelor's program, and 250 new students entering the programme each year through a standardised test. The majority of students are female (67.9%) and residing outside the territory of Venice (89.9%), usually meaning long commuting time or costly apartment rentals in the city. The majority of students, according to a survey conducted by Almalaurea in 2023, an Italian interuniversity Consortium, approach the programme out of curiosity and most of them come from families with no prior higher educational degrees. The tutoring sessions aimed to support the substantial number of first-year students, providing additional training to help them keep up with class content.

Activities were designed to actively engage students and encourage autonomy and agency in their learning process. During tutoring sessions, students worked independently in breakout rooms using their own study materials, online sources, or consulting apps designed by Mariotti for learning the language such as Jalea (2016) and Cafoscari Jisho (2022) developed by the Department of Asian and North African studies. Afterwards, the tutor facilitated a discussion about their findings in the Zoom main room. Students were prompted with questions to encourage active participation and reflection without engaging in formal correction, emphasising collaboration with peers rather than dependency on authority figures and allowing students to assume responsibility for collecting and sharing information that they found useful.

Custom worksheets were used to navigate through these activities, prompting students to self-retrieve and reflect on grammatical structures and available resources. The worksheets were structured into four columns: grammatical rule, example, source, and questions/doubts.

The approach was based on previous studies (Benson, 2013) confirming the effectiveness of self-retrieval activities and collaborative activities for fostering learning autonomy. Information was initially reported only in Japanese, with English translation added later, based on the No-Level-Brick framework and positing that students have the means to access any language material disregarding language proficiency and level barriers (Mariotti, 2017). Referencing was emphasised for verifying information validity and aid future retrieval.

Interviews

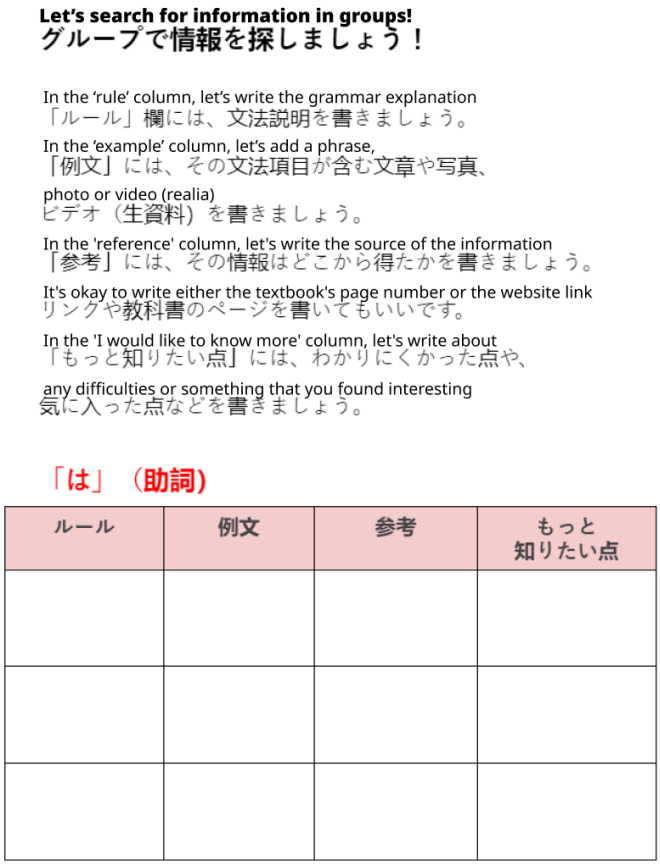


Figure 1. Example of a Worksheet Employed During Tutoring Activities

In late December, after the end of tutoring sessions, four participants were interviewed via Zoom. The interviews were conducted in Italian and later translated into English. Two interviewees were chosen for their regular attendance as representative samples (students A and B), while the other two were selected as unique examples (students C and D), as student C attended Japanese language classes pertaining to the critical and transformative No-Level-Brick framework (Mariotti, 2017), and student D spontaneously expressed his enthusiasm for tutoring activities. All interviewees were first-year Bachelor's students aged 19, except for student A, who was one year older. The sample size, however small, was considered representative of the average attendance.

The interview questions, based on previous research in autonomy and empowerment in language learning, were designed to highlight the transformative and critical aspects of

autonomy (Benson, 2013; Raya & Vieira, 2021). The interviews were structured into four sections:

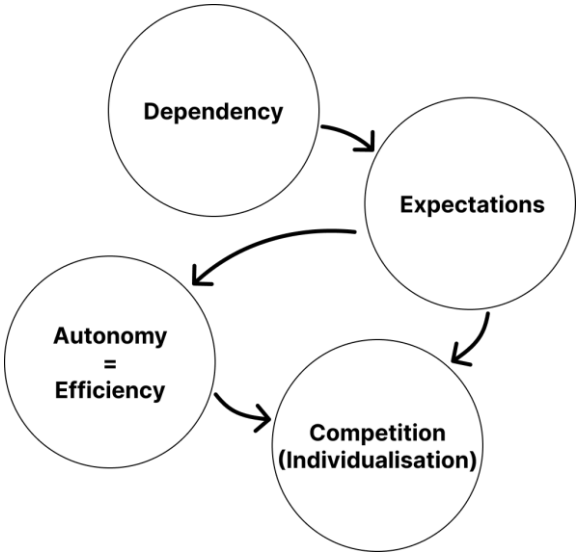
1. **Background Information:** aimed at gathering demographic details, prior experience with the Japanese language, and current university experience;
2. **Tutoring Activities:** explored students' perceptions of tutoring sessions and self-assessment of autonomy in language learning;
3. **Online Tools:** investigated the use and impact of tools like Jalea and CAFOSCARI Jisho on autonomous learning;
4. **Broader Perspectives:** explored cooperative and online learning through informal conversation.

The analysis employed thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes and patterns across the interviews to establish categories relevant to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

3. Results

The findings were categorised into three main thematic areas: students' expectations, dependency and autonomy, while a fourth theme 'competition' emerged unexpectedly in association with cooperative learning. These insights provide a clearer understanding of students' perspectives on the educational environment and the potential of tutoring practices for fostering agency and autonomy.

The interviews revealed a sense of dependency, as students expected the tutor to provide clear content and a structured learning environment, assuming responsibility for the



learning process. Autonomy, consequently, is perceived as an individual learning endeavour related to classroom content, essential for aligning with the institutional expected outcomes, thus equating with efficiency. These aspects relate to a sense of individualisation and

Figure 2. Analysis Results of the Online Interviews Conducted After Tutoring Activities for Japanese Language Students

competition, thereby inhibiting competition.

Dependency on the Tutor and Students' Expectations

All interviewed students attended Japanese language classes from the beginning of the semester, with one exception due to late enrolment. The general feedback was positive; however, students generally preferred direct explanations and grammar drills conducted by the tutor over active learning.

"The only thing is that sometimes, maybe when... for example, someone asked something… [...] the point is, you said, 'try to look [for yourself]'. But in my opinion, people don't always necessarily understand that...what they're looking for themselves. Also, because I think you know a lot more about grammar. **You have more experience** so in my opinion maybe...**explanations made by the person who knows more, you know, in my opinion are understood better**." (Student B)

"[I would] explain the rules and then focus on doing exercises, so I would just spend most of the time on doing exercises. **Together, maybe not independently,** but doing exercises together with the...with the tutor or the teacher, anyway, who is doing the tutoring." (Student C)

What both students stated can be interpretable with a sense of dependency on the tutor as a renewed, 'more knowledgeable' authority figure. Furthermore, student D pictured the tutor as an in-the-middle figure between teacher and student, offering more empathy but also necessary for successful learning:

"Well, let's say that unlike [during] tutoring, you try to make do as well as you can. [During tutoring] instead **there is a tutor who is almost like a teacher**, so maybe they can help you if you have any doubts that maybe are not so clear, they solve them quickly." (Student D)

When asked about their competence in studying autonomously, Student A responded:

"Competent... I mean, I set my own goals, but **I'm not sure I'm competent until I take the exam. I have no concrete ways to test what I do.** [...] I study autonomously and I do what I know I have to do. **But I don't know if my efforts are, I mean my efforts will become concrete when I take the test, I think**." (Student A)

This suggests a sense of dependency and reliance on the institution as the primary source of knowledge and validation. Moreover, students frequently used keywords such as 'programme', 'structure', 'organisation', and 'coherence', thus hinting at their expectations of a clear, structured, and teacher-driven learning environment.

Autonomy as Efficiency

All students had some degree of Japanese study experience before university, though none formally, motivated by a desire to not arrive at university "knowing nothing. At university, students reported dedicating more time to studying outside the classroom due to the fast-paced teaching. Their study sessions typically involved practising drills and exercises from weekly classes, guided by the syllabus.

"Yes, I mean, I would review my notes a little bit, I mean **I would follow what has been done in class, so maybe check the slides again...I review my notes, I consult Shinbunka** [the course textbook]...And...I go by topics, like unit one talked about this [topic] so I go over it, unit two talked about this other [topic] so I restudy this other one." (Student C)

Interestingly, when asked about their autonomy, student C primarily associated it with self-study sessions of classroom content. When questioned about their confidence in learning autonomously, students expressed varying levels of self-assessment, from two to four and a half out of five. For instance, Student C explains:

"More or less, I mean, yes, but maybe... **if I study completely autonomously maybe at some point I get lost. And I get lost meaning that maybe I go...too far**, I mean, I look at the topic and I see that there's something similar that maybe in reality goes further on [from the programme], and then maybe I do...**I don't follow the programme anymore, that means, I go beyond the programme**." (Student C)

Student D, who rated himself the lowest, further elaborates on this point:

"Because if I'm in a bad mood, I can't even open a book and instead if I'm in a good mood I put on a video and mainly my study method is based a lot [on this], actually it's based a lot on doing what I like, but in my own way. **That is, without necessarily using the list that they gave me at university**, like maybe I'll look up songs…" (Student D)

Notably, given the fact that students mainly associated autonomy with efficiency, student D assessed himself so lowly because he struggled with concentrating and keeping up with the programme schedule. Despite variously presenting initiative in using informal learning strategies, students' main objective remained the successful acquisition of class content.

Tutoring sessions were viewed as essential for aligning with classroom content, and students found them useful. Student A noted that tutoring introduced her to new tools and described worksheet activities as 'partly autonomous' due to personal research efforts. Student D found the activities engaging and enjoyable:

"I actually found them [the worksheet activities] also fun, even the fact that I had to look for some things [referring to grammatical topics]. And it's not the usual teacher's explanation. Even discussing with other students to discover things that I may not have seen, I may not have noticed and vice versa." (Student D)

Cooperative Learning, Competition, and Discomfort

When discussing cooperative learning, three out of four interviewees spontaneously mentioned that competition inhibited cooperation with their peers during tutoring sessions, but also classroom learning. Student B explained:

"There are people in my class who have already studied [Japanese] anyway, who maybe went to Japan, or maybe just as soon as the professor says something, then they immediately have it in their head [they already know it], so... **and it happens quite often that I feel maybe intimidated**. [...] And in my cohort there must be at least fifteen people who know things just like that, as soon as the teacher says something, they don't even know what they are thinking,

they already know how to say it. **Which sometimes is a bit of an issue because maybe I'm trying to think of the answer, but there's always someone saying it**." (Student B)

Competition eventually leads to discomfort, something that also student A seems to share:

"I was expecting to arrive [at university] and find a context where, I mean, everyone was starting more or less from scratch, and I imagined there would be people…[who might have had] like a bit of a general smattering [of Japanese], like how I had tried to do, but I found people who were much more competent and maybe, I was a little bit in the beginning… [...] I mean **I felt like I was behind, despite the fact that we were all at the beginning and despite the fact that I had already done an autonomous study, yes**." (Student A)

In relation to competition with peers, student D also discussed the pressure associated with the prestige of studying Japanese at Ca' Foscari University:

"Well, the fact that being here in Venice is… **you can feel the pressure.** [...] Well, let's say that if one thinks about wanting to study one Oriental language, in our case Japanese, one immediately thinks of Ca' Foscari University. Also, because in Italy it's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Japanese. [When asked if he feels some pressure about this]: **Yes, absolutely, even maybe from classmates, unintentionally, because maybe, I came to class not knowing half a word of Japanese** except for writing 15 hiragana… [...] Yes, you can feel the pressure a lot." (Student D)

Interestingly, Student B described the competitive atmosphere as a common understanding among Japanese language students in this context, picturing it as a source of potential motivation:

"It is some sort of pressure, but on the other hand it is **a push to**… let's say, **deepen my knowledge**, yes." (Student B).

Notably, three out of four interviewed students perceived a competitive atmosphere during their formal Japanese language learning at the university, associating it with pressure and discomfort. Accordingly, to the interpretation of autonomy as efficiency, the collective aspect of learning is disregarded, and informal learning not pertaining to classroom content is undervalued, leading to an individualised and efficient point of view of language acquisition.

4. Discussion

The results suggest that, while students demonstrated self-direction in their learning process both before and after entering university by engaging in informal learning, this informal learning did not translate into a critical assessment of their learning environment or course content. Consequently, students' informal learning cannot strictly be defined as autonomous when framed within the definition adopted by this dissertation (Raya &Vieira, 2021).

Autonomy was predominantly interpreted as a tool for efficiently retaining class content and studying individually, showing a sense of dependency on the tutor and a lack of self-awareness about their decisional capacities. This finding aligns with pre-existing research

on student autonomy, as students prefer leaving the decision-making process to teachers or authoritative figures (Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002). Moreover, as institutional directives directed tutors to stick to class content during tutoring sessions, students ended up not exercising their decisional and autonomous skills, aligning with Benson's (2013) assertion that constraining freedom and responsibility in the learning environment can disrupt any sense of autonomy for the learner.

Comparing the results to other Japanese language case studies in the same context, the study highlights a similar tendency among students to prefer structured and grammar-centred drills over a learner-centred, dialogic approach to language learning, while reproducing the teacher-learner hierarchical relationship into the tutor-tutee (Alessandrini, 2020). However, other case studies analysing projects employing the No-Level-Brick framework (Mariotti, 2017) have reported a surge in motivation and a redistribution of power which was not observable within this dissertation (Varone, 2021; Ligabue, 2021).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed at a) understanding the significance of promoting autonomy as a power-challenging pedagogical perspective in language learning in Higher Education, and b) comprehending its implications from a praxis-driven perspective through the analysis of a peer tutoring case study grounded in a critical and transformative approach to language learning.

While the explored body of literature, together with students' answers, hints at the importance of promoting autonomy to create the possibility for learners to renegotiate pedagogical roles and discuss dominant perspectives, the application of a critical and transformative framework is influenced by students' expectations and institutional requirements. The interviews revealed that, within the specific context of the case study, students rely on authority and do not critically assess what they are being taught. This result urges us to reflect on what our pedagogical practices drive from a more nuanced perspective that goes beyond viewing education and knowledge transmission as 'neutral'. The relevance of promoting autonomous learning in higher education lies in challenging these assumptions and imposed power relations or pedagogical roles. Fostering such reflection has the potential to allow learners to critically choose their standpoint in society and learning institutions, contributing to the larger task of forming "self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (Raya&Vieira, 2021, p. 84), going beyond a vision of language acquisition equating from proficiency and level barriers and moving to re-envisioning the power of language learning as a place for dialogue and connection.

Implications and Perspectives for Future Research

Addressing the limitations of the present study, such as the small sample size and single case study focus, future research could consider applying a quantitative approach to larger samples to better generalise the findings. Additionally, an action research framework could address the lack of the tutor's perspective through fieldwork notes and class observation, delving into tutor training, which has been found especially critical (Da Re, 2012; Bonelli & Da Re, 2012).

Certainly, as fixed content in tutoring sessions may have hindered student autonomy, future research applying a critical and transformative framework to peer tutoring may consider co-managing the learning content directly with participants, hopefully leading to different results in terms of autonomous learning.

Finally, we expect future research to further highlight the role of 'fun' as stimuli as well as outcome of autonomy and empowerment in critical peer-tutoring. Indeed, the interview to Student D (p. 7) in this case study, seems to suggest that such 'fun' can be generated from the 'unusual' (de-standardised) and from the co-working and co-discovering.

6. Author Contributions

Lara Pacini performed as the primary author concerning writing - original draft and conceptualisation. Marcella Mariotti performed supervision of overarching research goals and aims; writing-review, editing. Toshio Miyake performed writing-review, editing, and supervising conceptualisation.

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