

Fostering Autonomy through Meaningful Homework in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract

There is an important dichotomy between teachers' and students' expectations regarding homework in university. Teachers prioritise what they feel students need to become successful adults, while students are divided between learning and enjoying their life as young adults. In foreign language contexts, contact with the target language is limited outside of class, so homework can help fill that gap. There is a need to re-think the role of homework for university students, not only to improve learning in general, but to foster autonomy motivated by pleasure of learning and interest. Teachers must provide students with opportunities to develop individual interests and learning strategies through semi-controlled homework. This research will present different ways of rendering homework relevant by connecting learning to students' lives and by encouraging autonomous behaviours. Also, it finds out that what students learn in content classes taught in their first language should be connected to their second language classes. The students' perspectives will be analysed through interviews, and ways of stimulating learning autonomy outside of the classroom such as research projects, extra-curricular activities, etc. will be presented.

Keywords: homework, projects, motivation, autonomy

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Introduction

Teachers everywhere have to face students who are not motivated to learn. Children would rather enjoy their youth than study, while teachers do their best to instruct skills and knowledge that these future adults will need to be successful. A dichotomy exists between students' and teachers' expectation of what school should be, and this dichotomy is alive and well at the university level in Japan. Students want to enjoy their social life as young adults before they enter the demanding workforce, so they prioritize part-time work, club activities, and making friends over studying. On the other hand, many teachers, including foreign teachers who have a different experience of what constitutes university life, expect students to be more serious in their studies. Teachers often complain that students do not do homework, or that they do it overnight a few hours before it is due, or that they copy from classmates. Consequently, the quality is poor, and it does not lead to any intake.

From the students' point of view, however, homework might appear unmotivating or a waste of time. In the Japanese education system, passing an entrance exam is usually the most strenuous step, but completing courses and graduating are not expected to be so laborious. In addition, the mentality of Japan Inc. has traditionally been to provide full training to new employees and show them everything they need to know to do their work. Based on these, what pupils learn at school does not seem to matter so much in the end. Of course it does, but it is difficult to convince teenagers and young adults about the importance of being dedicated to their studies. Moreover, there is a wrong assumption that learning happens at school and only at school, not through personal interests (hobbies) or after graduation throughout one's life. The goal of education seems to be preparing students to pass tests; very little effort is made to connect what is learned in class with real life.

With this in mind, this paper will attempt to answer these questions:

1. What kind of homework will make students want to pursue their learning?
 - a. What is meaningful homework in the eyes of students?
2. What kind of homework will enhance their learning?

Context

In countries where English is widely spoken, people who learn English as a second language have daily opportunities to hear and practice the target language. In these countries, what is learned in class and life outside of the classroom are directly connected, and learners are motivated to learn in order to find employment, make friends, etc. However, in foreign language contexts, there is virtually no contact with the target language outside of class. Language education has then little to no choice but to rely on rote memorization, which cannot possibly be stimulating for students. Murray (2008) demonstrated that learners feel motivated if there is a connection between what they learn and their life.

In Japan, English cultural products such as music, magazines, etc. are not common considering that the entire nation learns English at school. Japan has a complete local artistic scene, and while Western (or American) cultures certainly influence Japanese artists, students generally have no direct contact with foreign culture. Their needs of

pop culture are satisfied with domestic products. In fact, even university English majors admitted having little to no interest in music sung in English (Marceau, 2017, p.194). Another factor in this problematic equation is that foreigners on Japanese television are usually dubbed in Japanese, denying viewers any exposure to foreign languages. While learning English is compulsory for all Japanese, it is almost censored off the air. This is not the case in many other countries, such as in Europe, says Kuure (2011, p.36). Japanese learners are therefore not in contact with much English, if any at all.

Moreover, the katakana alphabet allows Japanese speakers to transcribe foreign words into Japanese. This japanisation of foreign names, places, etc. eliminates any necessity to read the English language or alphabet. According to professor Paula Kalaja from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, children need “cereal box English”, referring to the multilingual food packaging in many countries (including the European Union, Canada, and many more) that exposes people to easily accessible foreign languages (Kalaja *et al.*, 2011). Myself, as a child, I learned a great deal of English vocabulary and identified many grammatical similarities and differences by reading both sides of the cereal box, the milk carton, etc. morning after morning while eating breakfast.

In 2008, Benesse, a major publisher of educational materials in Japan, released the results of a survey conducted both in Japan (n = 3700) and South Korea (n = 4019) about the usage of English at home among high school students (see figure 1). The results revealed that 76,1% of South Korean high schoolers read English books at home, while only 27,4% of Japanese high school students did the same, a difference of 48.7%. Another item, using Internet in English, had 79.4% of South Koreans answered positively, but only 20.9% for Japanese, this time a difference of 58.5% (Benesse, 2008)! Comparing these results with the average TOEIC scores between the years 2001 and 2011 in both countries (see figure 2), it is noticeable that while South Korea and Japan had similar results in 2001, 562 for Japan vs. 566 for South Korea, after ten years the average score for South Koreans jumped to 633, while Japan reached 574, only 12 points higher than a decade before. (NE Holdings, n.d.). After ten years, the gap between the two countries reached 59 points. While proving the direct causation between using English at home and the increase in TOEIC scores is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be assumed that the considerable difference in the amount of time spent using English probably helped.

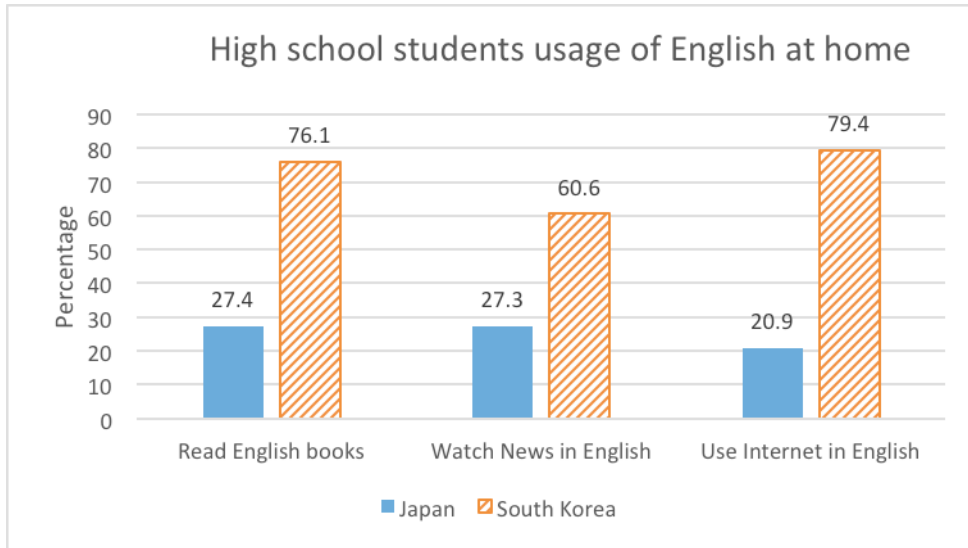


Figure 1.

Source: http://berd.benesse.jp/berd/center/open/syo/view21/2008/06/s09view_01.html

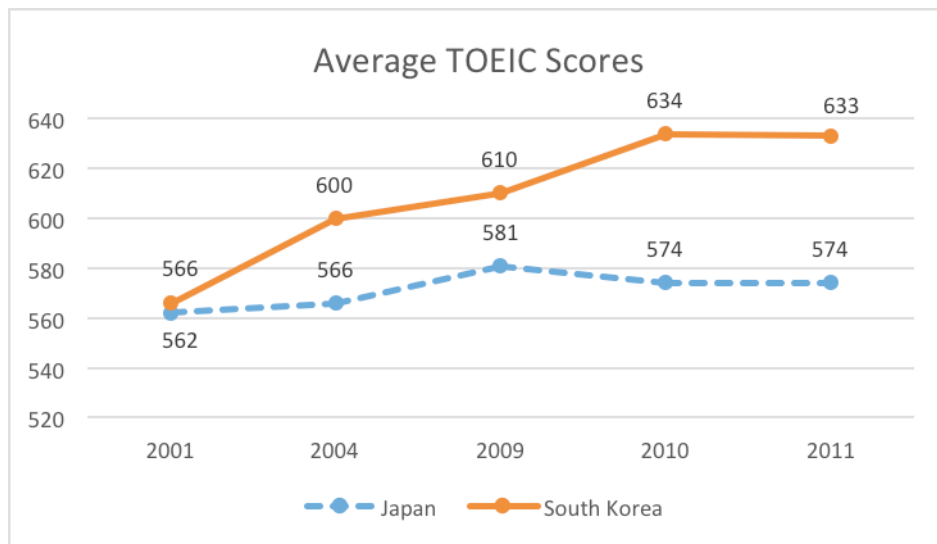


Figure 2.

Source: <http://www.ne-holdings.com/kobetsu/?p=2796>

What the Research Says

Motivation

Motivation can be challenging for teachers. While building motivating lessons are the teacher's responsibility, teachers wish students would adopt a more active and engaged attitude and find intrinsic reasons to be motivated. There are various ways to make a course more stimulating for students, and in the end, teachers would also benefit from a positive and stimulating environment and become more motivated themselves.

A dominant figure in motivation, Zoltán Dörnyei, has written numerous books and articles on the subject. While it is impossible to summarize Dörnyei's prolific career here, this paper will focus on a few main points. In 2001, in *Motivational Strategies in*

the Language Classroom, Dörnyei identified four steps in motivation: (1) creating the basic motivational condition, (2) generating initial motivation, (3) maintaining and promoting motivation, and (4) encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation (Dörnyei, 2001). If motivation is ultimately a question of internal factors, it is clear here that the teacher has a leading role such as creating and maintaining a motivating environment for students. In a country like Japan, where attending university is common (75,9% of students who graduate high school enroll into an institution of higher education (MEXT, 2005, p.10)), some students will reveal that they attend university because their parents pressured them to enroll, or because a university degree will improve their chances of finding employment in the future, no matter which field. It should therefore not be a surprise that some lack intrinsic motivation.

A few years later, in 2015, Dörnyei refined his approach and explained seeing successful motivation as *Directed Motivational Currents* (DMC): focused, strong, and sustained. Dörnyei imagines a perpetual movement sustaining and regenerating the motivation. The initial four-step model was refined as: (1) to have a goal or vision orientedness (or directional), (2) a triggering factor and launch, (3) a facilitative structure that includes behavioural routines and progress checks, and finally (4) a positive emotionality (Dörnyei, 2015). Interestingly, if the model appears to have been developed for language learning, it seems applicable to any learning contexts. Also interesting, positivity is a factor that is repeated in both models above. In addition to the two models mentioned above, in collaboration with Ema Ushioda, Dörnyei put forward that motivation is also greatly influenced by social interactions (teachers, peers, and second-language speaking communities) and learning environment (attitudes towards second language learning within the first-language speaking community) (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Being surrounded by motivated people is motivating, while the opposite is also true. Equally, living around people who demonstrate hostile attitudes towards a different cultural group will surely affect the motivation to learn the language of that group.

Issues

While second language learning happens through using that language, it does not happen naturally in a foreign language context like Japan. Japanese students who have frequent interactions with speakers of the target language are the exception rather than the norm. In many cases, students' only use of the language will be with other Japanese students in class or with their teacher, usually with the possibility of having recourse to their first language. Therefore, what determines if a student successfully learns a foreign language or not can unfortunately be their socio-economical background; for example, if their family can afford evening classes in private language schools, a private tutor, participate in study abroad programs, etc. Since foreign languages are within most people's reach through the Internet, then teachers need to help students to develop interests and autonomy. Without any chance to validate the accuracy of their language (or lack thereof), students will develop a kind of dialect that mixes English with *wasei-eigo* (English-inspired Japanese expressions) and Japanese-like grammar. In fact, this phenomenon was observed in ESL classes in Quebec (a French-speaking province in Canada), where "hearing more second language spoken by their first language-speaking classmates, students come to produce a distinct accent, a version of the second language that is almost a dialect or a creole", says Graham Fraser, former Commissioner of Official Languages in Canada

(Fraser, 2006, p.192). In this age of technology, where virtually every student owns a smartphone, there is no excuse not to tap into that authentic source of information and foreign languages that the Internet constitutes.

Communities

There is a shift happening among researchers, thinks Phil Benson, who no longer perceive second language acquisition as purely cognitive, but more of a participation in a community (2011, p.5). Garold Murray thinks that we should develop 'social learning spaces' (2001, p.133) where learners of any age can meet and learn with and from each other while maintaining individual goals, instead of isolating themselves. Gee (2005, p.214) agrees with Murray that the need is not to create a learning community, with a membership, but rather a learning *space* where people will interact. Too often learning groups are created but do not necessary lead to better learning or motivated learners since a common goal cannot be personalised, and decisions taken by the teacher or leader might not meet everybody's expectations. Palfreyman rather thinks that communities of learners who share similar goals or interests need to be created, because this way, the foreign language will not only become a hobby, but will be *necessary* (2011, p.26). Adult learners often fall into the first category described by Murray and Gee, while the reality described by Palfreyman resembles university classes, where goals might be a little more homogenous, such as passing the course, improving their TOEIC scores, etc.

With this in mind, it must be understood that the concept of learning in interaction is still relatively new for many, and goes against what students are used to (especially in Japan) and what is expected from them, even at the university level. Admittedly, most high-stakes tests such as entrance exams, TOEIC, final exams, etc. are individual tests. Team activities might build skills like fluency, problem-solving, negotiation of meaning, etc., but as long as decisive tests will require memorizing items and will assess receptive skills (reading and listening), it will be difficult to convince students (and conservative teachers) of the value of learning in interaction, especially if it is not assessed. Even if the necessity to communicate in English is understood, not all teachers are equipped to tackle this task due to large groups of students, syllabi based on vocabulary and grammar, and often, their own language-learning experience. However, with the Internet, access to information from around the world has exploded. We do not learn a language for an hypothetical future use; the present context is much of a *learn as you use* and *use as you learn* (Marsh, 2002, p.10). That means that if traditionally teachers provided most of the input, now learners have the possibility to learn individually through Internet, at home, on top of school experiences. "Students who learn languages only in the classroom tend to be limited, especially in their ability to use the language for spoken or written communication" (Benson, 2011, p.2). Teachers should therefore provide learning and reflecting opportunities for students to learn both individually and while interacting in a group.

An inspiring example is the education system in Finland, where students continuously scores among the highest in the world year after year (Williams-Grut, 2016). Since Finnish learn English as a foreign language as well, Japan could learn from their experience. At the Helsinki University Language Centre, the focus is on exchange programs, accreditation of out-of-classroom learning, and independent learning outside of the classroom (Pitkänen *et al.*, 2011). This implies that each student has his

or her own flexible study path and individual goals. Professors of The Language Center at Helsinki University of Technology now go as far as recommending a focus on dialogue and working life tasks instead of the traditional focus on correct language usage (Lappalainen, 2010). In addition, in Finnish universities, foreign language learning now includes semester projects, where second language teachers join student teams and play the role of linguistic experts, along with a teacher of the subject matter. Classroom language tasks are built in relation to the semester project, and students are motivated since the language activity is relevant for them (Kiviaho-Kallio, 2012, p.52).

Autonomy

This paper has for goal to identify what kind of homework could trigger students' motivation, interest, and ultimately autonomy. However, there can be no real autonomy if it does not originate from the learner; imposing autonomy on a learner goes against the meaning of the word itself. In order to be called autonomy, according to Phil Benson, it would in principle require students to decide by themselves, to learn independently, and to take full responsibilities of their learning (Benson, 2011, p12). This rigorous definition of autonomy is more likely to be found among adult learners, since while students are in school the idea to become autonomous usually originates from the teacher, and might even meet resistance from students who perceive the teacher's job as transmitting knowledge about a subject matter (Benson, 2011, p12). Some scholars such as Hunter and Cooke prefer the term *agency* to autonomy, as agency is not only independence, but also interdependence and social engagement (2007, p.74). The learners see social relations as dynamic learning opportunities and resources.

If teachers wish to see students more engaged and willing to learn autonomously, it is their role to help students finding new ways of learning (and using) foreign languages outside of the classroom (Kalaja *et al.*, 2011, p.58). It is not realistic to expect students to find new paths of learning without any guidance. If students need a gentle push towards autonomy, teachers should not put them through a *sink or swim* situation, claiming that this is how we learn. Autonomy is a hopeful goal that is not obvious to many, so teachers should provide students with multiple opportunities to develop individual interests and learning strategies. According to Murray, successful autonomous learners often develop their own strategies over their learning careers (2008).

While the goal of education might logically be to prepare students to be successful after graduation and for the rest of their life, connections between school and real life are unfortunately scarce. In some foreign language education contexts, the goal of education seems to be preparing the students to pass a test rather than providing them with basic skills and knowledge to be refined throughout their life. The information is mostly memorized to pass tests, and then forgotten. There seems to be an assumption that learning happens strictly at school, too. "There are a variety of contexts for second language learning outside the world of school, and a great deal depends on the learners' perception of and willingness to exercise their power to act, or agency" (Kalaja *et al.*, 2011, p.55). This proves to be a problem among many Japanese learners, who adopt a passive attitude towards learning, waiting to be taught. "Effective learning requires teacher support but also, more fundamentally, active

learner involvement” reminds us Takala (2002, p.41). The classroom atmosphere will also become more positive and motivating if learners are involved. In Finland, Kalaja argues that many students miss learning opportunities present in informal contexts because they fail to notice them (2011, p.57). An unfortunately common example in Japan is foreign language students who admit only having spoken Japanese when traveling to neighbouring countries (Taiwan, South Korea, etc.) or not interacting with local people at all because that would require them to use English. Shyness and fear of making a mistake seem sadly stronger than the very purpose of their studies.

In the end, the ultimate goal, the “Holy Grail” in autonomy would be *self-directed naturalistic learning*, an expression coined by Phil Benson, “where learners invariably have an intention to learn the target language, and they do so by creating naturalistic learning situations for themselves” (Benson, 2001, p.77) motivated by pleasure of learning and individual interests. This implies that learners have personal learning goals beyond university graduation, and enough free time outside of work.

Data Collection & Results

In order to understand the students’ point of view regarding homework, qualitative data (their thoughts and experiences) were collected through interviews. Wishing to generate answers that reflected both the individuals and the groups, the interviews took the form of a think-pair-share activity; students reflected individually, then brainstormed more answers in small groups, shared their ideas with the entire class, and wrote them on the board. Students had to answer the following questions:

1. What are examples of good homework? How did it help you?
2. What are examples of bad homework? Why do you dislike it?
3. Should homework be banned in university?

The questions were kept simple to ensure that linguistic difficulties would not be in the way of their reflection. Students were all second year foreign language majors, fifty-eight students in total. In addition to answering the questions pertaining to this research, an additional goal was to bring students to reflect on their expectations and behaviour in their studies. Here are some of their answers:

1. Examples of good homework:

Project alone

Free study: we choose the topic

Sometimes translation because good content input

Choose homework that we need

2. Examples of bad homework (parenthesis added):

Long translation

Even if you understand you have to do long homework

Homework you don't know you are making mistakes (answer keys not provided)

More homework sent after class (by email)

Additional comments made by students:

“The teacher gives us homework 1 hour every 2 weeks. Very long.”

“Good homework is about my life”

“I don’t have time to study for French because of English homework.”

“We get many homework before TOEIC and can’t study.”

Discussion

Answers were quite consistent across the four groups interviewed, meaning there were all similar. After three or four answers were written on the board, students did not seem to want to extend any further, agreeing with each other. Also, it was easier for them to come up with negative examples than positive ones, and they had difficulties justifying their examples (the second part of question 1 and 2). The word “boring” was often uttered, even after I pressed them to explain the reason why they think homework is boring. Regarding banning homework in university (question 3), students could not come to a mutual agreement. The consensus was that banning homework was going too far, yet students could not agree on an acceptable compromise for the length or amount of homework. I understood that the students and I have different expectations when some complained that one hour of homework a week for a class was too much. I am guessing that this might depend on how useful or interesting the students perceive a course to be, although there is no certain way to be sure at the moment. Perhaps their social life and part-time work have priority over their studies.

Students’ answers show a demand for more freedom and autonomy. Students complained about being assigned time-consuming homework right before high-stakes tests like TOEIC or TOEFL, and not having time to study for courses related to their major because of excessively long homework in other courses. While the results point in the direction of wanting more autonomy, students seem to be at an impasse between passivity in class and being responsible for their learning. This means that a gradual approach is needed to guide the students.

Solutions

In light of the motivation, the sense of community, and the autonomy necessary to achieve a durable momentum in learning, successful homework seems to require a connection between what is learned in class and the world outside of school. In *Language Curriculum Design*, Paul Nation mentions two practical suggestions to encourage students to become responsible in their studies: by asking them to discuss their learning goals with classmates (the conditions for successful learning, their own ways to reach their goals, etc.), and by asking the students to complete tasks that do not require teacher guidance (or just a little) so that they can see what they could accomplish autonomously (Cotterall, 1995, in Nation, 2010, p.207).

Additionally, there are many ways to use a foreign language at home, but Sundqvist (2011) argues that they are not all equal. For example, playing video games, surfing the Internet, and reading require learners to be active, productive, and rely on their language skills, whereas listening to music or watching television and movies enable the student to be passive or receptive. This is significant considering that listening to

music and watching television are the two most popular activities in Sundqvist's study (p.114). In the end, Sundqvist established that the amount of time that students spend using English outside of English lessons "correlated positively and significantly with both [the students'] level of oral proficiency and the size of their vocabulary" (2011, p.117). This seems to add weight to the comparative analysis of Japanese and South Korean high school students' TOEIC scores mentioned earlier.

Successful Experience

The goal is to make homework appear meaningful for students and valuable language learning activities at the same time. A successful example, developed with a few colleagues, are short research projects that connect the classroom with students' life and can be used in any foreign language course. The initial goal was to provide students with a reason to use English. The research projects cover these objectives on top of fostering autonomy. Projects are less teacher-dictated because students are brought to take decisions such as choosing a topic, being responsible for researching the content, etc. The teacher becomes a member of the audience and assess the presentations discretely. In class, students give presentations to their classmates in small groups, multiple times (similar to a 4-3-2 activity in order to increase fluency and retention). In addition, students can create a visual support such as a poster, a postcard, a PowerPoint, a Prezi, etc. The audience must be given a task to complete since they can learn from listening to their classmates: taking notes, looking for specific information in the presentation, or summarising it. Lastly, a post-presentation linking activity can be added such as writing, ranking, discussion, etc. These projects are built following Dörnyei's concept of Directed Motivation Currents (2015): (1) a clearly defined target, (2) using content that is relevant to the students and offer an authentic learning experience. (3) The teacher offers regular checks and feedback, and finally, (4) students work in a positive atmosphere, support each other in small groups, and reports to classmates.

An example of research project that has been successful takes place during the unit on people with disabilities and the challenges that they face. I would like to give credits to my good friend Andy Tweed for the original idea and for developing the project together. Students' task was to choose and evaluate a building on campus or anywhere in town on its ease of access for people with different physical disabilities. Students used their smartphones or cameras to take pictures or videos, and took field notes on what they noticed. Next, students prepared a short presentation about their findings. Back in class, groups were rearranged so that each group consisted of a member who investigated a different building. Finally, the groups evaluated the buildings by ranking them in order of ease of access. Students then wrote a justification consisting of at least two sentences per building.

Extra-curricular activities

Another opportunity for students to use foreign language outside of the classroom is during extra-curricular activities. International students should be encouraged to join club activities such as sport teams and art clubs together with local students. This would provide members with authentic opportunities to use foreign languages. Students would focus on communication rather than accuracy, and both local and

international students would enjoy and learn from the cultural and linguistic exchanges.

Additionally, there are several international centers in cities around Japan where different cultural activities or linguistic exchanges are organised. Garold Murray (2008) points out the beneficial role that self-access centers play in universities, where students can have support from an educator and access to different resources in order to pursue individual goals. Finally, Murray advocates online discussion groups such as *Moodle*, where students have a real purpose to use the language to communicate, on top of the work done in class (p.139).

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to find out what constitutes meaningful and motivating homework for both students and educators. In the eyes of students, motivating work is related to them. They want to see a connection between school and real life. Ideally, teachers of different disciplines and language teachers would cooperate to make a coordinated curriculum so students can make connections between what they learn in their first and second languages. Moreover, the language teacher should have a basic knowledge of the topics covered, and the subject teacher a basic command of the foreign language. From the perspective of the teacher, homework should be assessed; this would create an extrinsic motivating factor, which, while being artificial, would push unmotivated students (or students who might not care for a good grade) to complete their assignment, hopefully helping them learn.

However, it remains challenging to find real-life situations where students can use English in foreign language contexts like Japan. The lack of English speakers is a real problem for an entire nation who tries to learn a language purely for testing purposes. Spending years learning a language without using it makes it extremely difficult to motivate learners. On campus, universities should make efforts to integrate international students with local students and facilitate exchanges. Finally, teachers need to let students take their own decisions in order to increase autonomy. Controlling every detail of their education is the best way to keep students in a passive and immature state and limit their development towards becoming responsible adults. Educators should encourage students to be active learners, with the goal of becoming more independent, and ultimately autonomous. Autonomy and a mature sense of responsibility will not happen overnight, but need to be developed before students start their career.

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