Learner autonomy is defined as socially mediated agency (Toohey and Norton, 2003) and it develops through interaction with more capable peers (Little, 2000). The research on learner autonomy has been conducted focusing on learners’ ability and action in/outside the classroom. However, Aoki (2009) pointed out that ‘we need more balanced holistic approaches that situate individual capacity in the social context’ (ibid., p.254). In order to do so, life story interviews is a one of the powerful tools to examine learner autonomy in a long time span (ibid., p.254).

In this research, I conducted life story interviews on a Chinese foreign worker in Japan who have lived for more than 10 years. He is working for a company after finishing graduate school in Japan. I interviewed him three times for about three hours in total and transcribed the audio-recorded interview data, then extracted his life stories of learning experience to situate his learner autonomy in the social context.

His life stories show that he thinks that language learning take place not at language lessons but through his autonomous practices using Japanese in his daily life such as inquiring and negotiating in Japanese, organizing an ethnic music concert, and getting business knowledge and expressions changing his jobs. These practices were sometimes supported by significant others in both Japan and China, and sometimes restrained by visa status or racial prejudice. This analysis indicates that his learning is connected with realizing ‘social identity’ (Riley, 2003) and his self-realization has driven by learner autonomy as agency affected by dominant ‘master narratives’ which are common within a cultural context, and ‘model stories’ shared in a community he belongs to.

In the presentation, I will elaborate on that the learner autonomy constructed by the social context and discuss the importance of exploring learner autonomy from learners’ perspective.

Keywords: learner autonomy, social context, social identity.