

Language learner autonomy: what, why and how?

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Abstract

It is generally agreed that language learner autonomy is a matter of learner control and self-direction. Most discussion assumes that the crucial distinction is between non-autonomous and autonomous learners, and that the teacher's role is to manage the transition to self-directed learning. This article elaborates an alternative view. It begins by pointing out that although they may be novices in language learning, learners of all ages usually exhibit a high degree of expertise and autonomy in their life outside the classroom. According to this view, the teacher's role is to engage learners' pre-existing capacity for autonomous behaviour (their agency) and harness it to the business of language learning. After describing classroom procedures designed to achieve this goal, the article further elaborates its understanding of learner autonomy with reference to the theory of 'situated learning' and the concept of 'communities of practice'. It concludes by summarizing the implications of the argument for more advanced language learning and for second language acquisition research.

Language learner autonomy is real

It is important to begin by insisting that language learner autonomy as I describe it in this article is real. It is not a distant goal that shimmers beguilingly like a mirage in the desert but a pedagogical achievement that has been documented in a number of second language (L2) education contexts. For many years it has characterized the practice of Leni Dam and Hanne Thomsen in their English language classrooms in Denmark (Dam 1995, 2000, Thomsen 2000, 2003). It has also shaped the teaching of L2 English and French in a number of classrooms in Norway (Aase et al. 2000), the learning of L2 English in Irish primary schools (Little 2004, 2005), and the learning of L2 English by adult immigrants in Ireland (Little 2009). Reflection on these and other examples of successful practice underlies the theoretical perspectives and practical proposals presented here.

The concept of language learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy in L2 education was first elaborated by Henri Holec in *Autonomy and foreign language learning*, a report published by the Council of Europe in 1979 (cited here as Holec 1981). Holec defined learner autonomy in terms of learner self-direction and control of the learning process. For him the teacher's principal task was to support the transition from dependence to autonomy by helping learners to develop their capacity for self-management. This approach to learner autonomy focuses on the individual learner and his or her use of cognitive and metacognitive resources to shape the language learning process; it had a very great impact on the development of self-access language learning in university language centres in the 1980s. Because Holec distinguished between non-autonomous and autonomous learners, he saw language learning and the development of learner autonomy as two separate processes. This helps to explain the concern of some researchers to explore learners' 'readiness for autonomy' (e.g., Cotterall 1995, Chan 2001, Ming and Alias 2007) and the many attempts over the past thirty years to measure and evaluate learners' autonomy independently of their target language proficiency (most recently, Benson 2010, Lamb 2010).

My own work on learner autonomy took Holec's report as its starting point (Little 1991), and I have always assigned a central role to learner self-direction and self-management. But I soon became unhappy with the belief that the teacher's task is to lead her learners from dependence to autonomy. My difficulty lay in the fact that, however they may have been conditioned to behave in classrooms, learners of all ages have experience of what it is to be autonomous in their lives outside the educational establishment they are attending. This fact is neatly caught by the educational psychologist Phillida Salmon in the following description of the realities of family life:

To parents, even babies seem to have a will of their own; they are hardly passive creatures to be easily moulded by the actions of others. From their earliest years, boys and girls make their active presence, their wilful agency, their demands and protests, very vividly felt. In every household that has children, negotiations must be made with young family members: their personal agendas have somehow to be accommodated. (Salmon 1998: 24)

Having thoughts and emotions that no one else can access directly; pursuing personal goals that coincide with our interests, needs and personal priorities: autonomy in this sense is part of

everyone's lived experience (though it may well not be something of which we are consciously aware). This led me to the view that the crucial distinction is not between non-autonomous and autonomous learners but between learners whose autonomy is focused on the business of language learning and learners whose autonomy is focused elsewhere. Every teacher will have her own favourite example of learners in the latter category. Mine is provided by the science-fiction author Douglas Adams, who wrote: 'I vaguely remember my schooldays. They were what was going on in the background while I was trying to listen to the Beatles' (Adams 2002: 3).

For me, the essence of learner autonomy is willing, proactive and reflective involvement in one's own learning (Little 1991, 2007). According to this understanding, learner self-management is not the ultimate goal but the means by which we harness our learners' agency, or 'capacity to act' (van Lier 2008: 163). We need to do this because 'learning depends on the activity and the initiative of the learner, more so than on any "inputs" that are transmitted to the learner by a teacher or a textbook' (ibid.). This view of learner autonomy implicates the learner's sense of identity and the knowledge and experience he or she has gained outside the classroom. It also offers a solution to the perennial problem of learner motivation, since learners whose agency is engaged are by definition positively motivated. And because the exercise of agency is always 'a social event that does not take place in a void' (van Lier 2008: 164), learner autonomy is a social-interactive as well as an individual-cognitive phenomenon. In any formal learning environment, the exercise and development of one learner's autonomy necessarily depends on but also supports the exercise and development of the autonomy of other learners: responsibility for one's own learning entails responsibility for the learning of other members of the class. Finally, and crucially, the target language itself is the medium of learner agency in the autonomy classroom, which means that the 'agency' view of learner autonomy does not distinguish between language learning on the one hand and the development of learner autonomy on the other. They are two sides of the same coin

What language learner autonomy can achieve: two examples

Before discussing the beliefs and pedagogical approach that characterize the autonomy classroom, it may be helpful to consider two results of autonomous learning. Towards the end of their fourth year in her English class, Leni Dam gave each of her learners a sheet of paper and asked them briefly to assess their overall progress. Here are the (unedited) texts written by two of those learners (Dam and Little 1998):

Text 1

Most important is probably the way we have worked. That we were expected to and given the chance to decide ourselves what to do. That we worked independently [...]. And we have learned much more because we have worked with different things. In this way we could help each other because some of us had learned something and others had learned something else. It doesn't mean that we haven't had a teacher to help us. Because we have, and she has helped us. But the day she didn't have the time, we could manage on our own.

Text 2

I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And I think that our 'together' session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent.

Bearing in mind that these texts were written in response to the teacher's request for an immediate judgement, the first thing about them that strikes us is their combination of fluency and competence. Because English has been the medium of these learners' agency in the autonomy classroom from the beginning, it has become an instrument that they can wield with confidence and effect. They will have no difficulty using English to achieve their goals in the world outside school: the way they have learnt ensures that their proficiency is a fully integrated part of their identity. The second thing that strikes us is what the two texts tell us about the relation between their authors' proficiency in English and their awareness of the learning process. The first text focuses on learner self-direction and control, and the benefits that they bring not just to the individual learner but to the class as a whole ('in this way we could help each other'): as we noted above, the exercise of agency always has social as well as individual consequences. The second text provides evidence of the capacity of the autonomy classroom to create continuities between learning at school and living one's life outside the classroom ('I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home'), to have an impact on general attitudes and behaviour ('I think that our "together" session has helped me to become better at listening to other

people and to be interested in them'), and to contribute to personal development and self-esteem ('I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent').

Teaching in the autonomy classroom (Dam 1995, 2000)

The following description of the beliefs and pedagogical practice that shape the autonomy classroom are based largely on the work of Leni Dam (1995, 2000), sustained reflection on which has played a decisive role in forming the theoretical views I have just summarized.

Like most language teachers around the world, the teacher in an autonomy classroom believes that it is her job to develop her learners' proficiency in the target language. But unlike the majority of teachers, she believes that she can do this only by involving her learners from the very beginning in target language use that is spontaneous and authentic: spontaneous in the sense that it is prompted by and responds to the unpredictable demands of classroom communication; authentic in the sense that it arises from but also speaks to the experience, interests, needs, priorities and concerns of individual learners. This is another way of saying that the teacher in an autonomy classroom believes that from the first her learners' agency should be channelled through the target language, that the target language itself is the key cognitive tool that supports successful learning.

At the same time, however, the teacher recognizes that her learners' mother tongue has an essential role to play; it is, after all, the medium in which they think discursively and the scaffold on which they must gradually assemble the components of their target language as an alternative code. She communicates with her learners in the target language, using mime, gesture and other visual supports to get her message across, and she makes sure that all learning activity has as its goal the production of the target language in speech or writing. But she translates words and phrases into the target language on demand, and allows her learners to use their mother tongue, especially in the early stages, in order to solve problems that arise in pair and group work. She also scaffolds their attempts to speak the target language in much the same way that parents scaffold the speech of a small child learning his mother tongue.

Because self-management is the means by which the teacher aims to harness her learners' agency, she requires them to identify learning targets and select learning activities. This does not mean, however, that she leaves them to their own devices. On the contrary, she mediates the setting of targets and the selection of learning activities by inviting suggestions, subjecting those suggestions to critical scrutiny (the learners themselves contribute to this), and insisting that all learning is regularly evaluated. She inevitably engages her learners in a

great deal of metacognitive talk – in the target language – as she manages the work cycle and monitors their progress.

If the target language itself is the channel of learning, the teacher uses two pedagogical tools to mediate the target language to her learners and enable them to mediate it to themselves: logbooks and posters. On their first day in her classroom she gives each of them a plain notebook in which they will plan, execute, monitor and evaluate their learning (she also gives them each a picture dictionary). They use their logbook to record the agenda and content of each lesson, plans for homework, and words and phrases that they need to memorize. The logbook is also the place where they write short texts of various kinds (the longer texts produced in due course by group projects are kept in a dossier). After several years learners will have a number of logbooks that provide a cumulative record of their growth as learners but also users of the target language – it is by no means the least important function of the logbook that it helps to overcome the inevitably fragmentary and episodic nature of all classroom learning.

Whereas the logbook supports individual learning, posters support the learning of the class as a whole. They are created by the teacher in interaction with the class and serve a wide variety of purposes. For example, they may be used to accumulate words and phrases that can be used to evaluate the learning process and its outcomes; to list ideas for learning activities and homework; to capture the results of a whole-class brainstorming, perhaps on ways of learning vocabulary or reasons for learning a foreign language. In due course learners themselves use posters to support the management of project work, for example by listing the roles of the various project members or recording progress. There are two reasons for using posters rather than the blackboard or whiteboard. First, they can be retained for as long as their content is relevant and then stored for possible future reference; and second, most classroom walls can accommodate posters whose total area, and thus information content, greatly exceeds the area of the blackboard or whiteboard.

Learning activity in the autonomy classroom has two main focuses: the creation of target language texts, which gives learning a ‘here and now’ purpose and relevance; and the production of learning materials, which encourages intentional, analytic learning and develops awareness of linguistic form. Both kinds of activity are managed by the learners themselves, but with guidance from the teacher and regular evaluation.

The teacher launches creative text production in the very first lesson. She introduces herself to the class in the target language (‘My name is ...’, ‘I live in ...’, ‘I have ... brothers and ... sisters’, ‘My hobbies are ...’, etc.), writing key phrases on a poster. Then she invites

her learners to call out in their mother tongue the words and phrases they need in order to describe themselves. Whatever they call out she translates into the target language, writing the translations on posters. The learners copy the target language words and phrases they need in their logbooks and for their first homework write a short text entitled 'About myself'. Thus from the first day they use the target language to create meaning that is directly relevant to themselves, since it expresses part of their identity. This is an essential first step in making the target language a channel for the learners' agency. What is more, the structure of learners' texts, a sequence of simple declarative sentences, can be adapted to support the creation of other texts. For example, learners select from a magazine a picture of a person or scene that appeals to them, then compose a text describing the picture. From these beginnings learners graduate to writing stories and poems either individually or in groups; they may also choose to write plays, and by the end of their first year they should be able to collaborate on project work with other learners.

The first intentional learning activity that the teacher proposes is the making of word cards, which have a target language word on one side and its definition on the other (the definition may be a drawing, a picture cut from a magazine or catalogue, or an equivalent word in the learner's mother tongue). Learner self-management means that each learner chooses which words to make cards for and how to 'translate' the meaning of the word. Thus each set of cards reflects the interests of the learner who created it. Classroom time is given to sharing this work by 'playing' with word cards, either individually or in small groups. In this way individual learning contributes to the learning of the class as a whole. From word cards, learners progress to making dominoes – the left half of each card contains a picture, while the right half contains a phrase or sentence that describes the picture on another card. And from dominoes they progress to picture lotto, which requires them to find or draw pictures and write a descriptive text for each one. Again, when other learners play with the dominoes or picture lotto, the effort of individual learners benefits the class as a whole. Of course, learners must master the interactive language that they need in order to play with word cards, dominoes or picture lotto; a poster may be used to mediate essential words and phrases.

Because everything that happens in the autonomy classroom is mediated in the target language, it is impossible to maintain a clear distinction between the 'four skills'. It is also difficult to maintain a clear separation between intentional learning activities and creative text production, especially when learners have ceased to be beginners (cf. the ambitious vocabulary learning project reported in Thomsen 2003). The dynamic of the autonomy classroom depends on writing in order to speak and speaking in order to write; and as I noted

above, writing in logbooks and on posters is the way in which the target language becomes the channel of learners' agency in the autonomy classroom. As it does so, learners gradually master three interacting roles. They are simultaneously communicators, using and gradually developing communicative skills in the target language; experimenters with language, gradually developing an explicit knowledge of the target language system; and intentional learners, gradually developing explicit awareness of the what and the how of language learning.

The autonomy classroom as a community of practice

According to the theory on which this article is based, learner autonomy is a social-interactive as well as an individual-cognitive phenomenon: the exercise and development of the individual learner's autonomy supports and depends on the exercise and development of the autonomy of all other members of the class; individual learning always contributes to the learning of the class as a whole. In this the autonomy classroom coincides with Etienne Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning, which is based on four premises (Wenger 1998: 4):

1. We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.
2. Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises – such as singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, writing poetry, being convivial, growing up as a boy or a girls, and so forth.
3. Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.
4. Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce.

Wenger's theory has four components – meaning, practice, community and identity –, which he glosses as follows (ibid.: 5)

1. *Meaning*: a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful.

2. *Practice*: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
3. *Community*: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.
4. *Identity*: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.

It is unnecessary to labour the close fit between the autonomy classroom and Wenger's theory, which is elaborated in terms of 'communities of practice' (see also Lave and Wenger 1991) whose typical mode of learning is apprenticeship: novices gradually become experts by participating in the practice of the community in question. This model poses a challenge to traditional forms of schooling because schools are remote from communities of practice; physics, for example, is taught at a distance from practising physicists and history at a distance from practising historians. Similarly, languages are taught separately from their 'natural' contexts of use, and in the case of foreign languages, at a distance from them. This helps to explain the widespread assumption that a foreign language is 'out there' and the most that teachers can do is develop their learners' capacity to communicate as if they were outside the classroom. By contrast, the autonomy classroom focuses on the here and now of the learners. Based on the belief that authentic language use is the only reliable path to success in language learning, it aims to give learners a sense of individual and collective responsibility for their learning and to create a self-transforming community of practice that gradually develops in communicative proficiency and linguistic competence. Because learners' agency is channelled through the target language, learning is 'from the inside out': the target language is learned out of the learners' identity, experience, interests and personal priorities.

Conclusion: wider implications of the argument

In conclusion I want to summarize the implications of my argument, first for more advanced stages of L2 learning and then for the so-called 'social turn' in L2 acquisition research.

My practical focus has been on 'general' language learning as exemplified in the practice of Leni Dam (1995, 2000; see also Thomsen 2000, 2003 and Little 2009). If we pursue the parallel between the autonomy classroom and Lave and Wenger's 'community of practice', the question arises: What exactly is the 'practice' that defines the autonomy classroom whose goal is 'general' language learning? The answer implied by my description of that classroom is: individual and collaborative pursuit of activities that combine the

production of TL texts with intentional language learning. I have argued that the success of this practice depends on two factors: (i) using the target language, mediated through logbooks and posters, as the primary channel of learning, and (ii) ensuring that learners' agency is fully engaged by requiring them to take key decisions that are necessarily shaped by their experience, needs, interests and priorities. Because the exercise and development of learner autonomy depend on social-interactive as well as individual-cognitive processes, the autonomy classroom gradually transforms itself as a community of practice by processes of individual and collective scaffolding. But general language learning has its limits, and learners in the autonomy classroom reach a point where they need new challenges. Within systems of schooling those challenges are most likely to be provided by CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) programmes, in which 'practice' becomes the curriculum content in question, which should be delivered, explored, digested and exploited using the methods with which learners are already familiar. After that learners may be ready to pursue (part of) their higher education through the target language, at which point 'practice' is defined in terms of the academic discipline(s) they are engaged with. Again, maximum success depends on following the procedures of the autonomy classroom. From general language learning through CLIL to higher education in the target language: that is the L2 educational trajectory that many countries are seeking to promote, especially when the target language is English. But few of those countries can boast even small numbers of autonomy classrooms at the first of these levels; while the understanding of learning and teaching on which practice in the autonomy classroom is founded implies a major pedagogical challenge both to CLIL programmes and to university courses.

The need to meet that challenge is reinforced by the fact that the 'agency' view of language learner autonomy coincides with the 'social turn' in theories of second language acquisition. For example, the 'agency' view is underpinned by a belief that L2 proficiency emerges gradually from L2 use, which coincides with one of the key tenets of complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). The 'agency' view is also harmonious with neo-Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Lantolf and Thorne 2006, Lantolf and Poehner 2008), the sociocognitive approach (Batstone 2010), and various ecological approaches (Kramsch 2002, van Lier 2004). Since the 1980s the approach to L2 learning and teaching that I have described in this article has shaped successful practice in a small number of classrooms. It is eminently practical and easily replicable: it states clearly what teachers should do and explains why they should do it. It also offers to provide the kind of environment that social theories of second language acquisition will need to explore if they are to develop further on

the basis of empirical research. The challenge to pedagogy and research is clear; whether they will respond, however, remains uncertain.

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