

## CHAPTER 44

# AUTONOMY AND ITS ROLE IN LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the development of the concept of autonomy in ELT and makes particular reference to its role in helping teachers come to terms with changing landscapes of teaching and learning. It then goes on to outline what we know about autonomy and its implementation to date and to discuss three current issues of concern: the social character of autonomy, learners' knowledge of the learning process, and teacher autonomy. The chapter concludes by indicating possible future developments in the field.

### AUTONOMY IN LEARNING: WHAT IT IS AND WHERE IT COMES FROM

In the field of political philosophy, autonomy signifies “the free choice of goals and relations as an essential ingredient of personal well-being” (Raz, 1986, p. 369). The fundamental idea in autonomy, according to Young (1986, p. 35), “is that of authoring one’s own world without being subject to the will of others.” In this broad sense, *personal autonomy* has long been an acknowledged goal of education systems that seek to develop individuals who are capable of free and critical participation in the societies in which they live. The acknowledgment of this goal does not, however, necessarily imply the exercise of autonomy within the learning process itself. As Boud (1988) observes, “as long as autonomy remains an abstract concept divorced from any particular situation, it can be an ideal to which we can aspire but it is not something that we can realistically expect to emerge from any given course” (p. 20).

Thus, although the concept of personal autonomy provides a point of reference, theorists of autonomy in learning are especially concerned with learners' active participation in the day-to-day processes of their learning. This participation is seen as being both essential to the development of personal autonomy and beneficial to the learning process itself. In this sense, the origins of the idea of autonomy in language learning lie more in the radically student-centered educational thought of writers such as Dewey (1916), Freire (1970), Illich (1971), and Rogers (1969); in work on adult self-directed learning by writers such as Brookfield (1986), Candy (1991), Knowles (1975), and Tough (1971); and in work on the psychology of

learning by writers such as Kelly (1963), Barnes (1976), Kolb (1984), and Vygotsky (1978).

The theory and practice of *autonomy in language learning* was first developed systematically in the 1970s in the context of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, which at that time aimed to provide adults with opportunities for lifelong foreign language learning. Since the early 1980s, autonomy has become an increasingly important concept in foreign language education, and a number of books, collections of papers, and journal special issues have appeared (e.g., Barfield & Nix, 2003; Benson, 2001; Benson & Toogood, 2002; Benson & Voller, 1997; Brookes & Grundy, 1988; Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1987; Dickinson & Wenden, 1995; Holec, 1988; Little, 1991; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Pemberton, Li, Or, & Pierson, 1996; Riley, 1985; Sinclair, McGrath, & Lamb, 2000). Indeed, it is mainly within the field of language education that the theory and practice of autonomy in learning has developed in recent years. Before discussing the concept of autonomy in more detail, it is therefore worth pausing to consider why it has come to have a particular resonance for language teachers and researchers.

### *The Significance of Autonomy in ELT*

Gremmo and Riley (1995) have suggested that the rise of the concept of autonomy in learning in the 1970s corresponded to an ideological shift away from consumerism and materialism towards an emphasis on the value of personal experience, quality of life, personal freedom, and minority rights. In its origins, therefore, autonomy was an antiauthoritarian idea, which was, even in the late 1980s, often "associated with a radical restructuring of language pedagogy, a restructuring that involves the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working" (Allwright, 1988, p. 35). These new ways of working, as they were developed at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, France, and elsewhere, included self-access (Riley & Zoppis, 1985) and learner training (Holec, 1980), two modes of practice that were specifically intended to foster autonomy.

The more widespread current interest in the concept of autonomy could be seen as a sign of growing acceptance of its radical implications within the ELT community. However, this acceptance also has much to do with changes in the landscape of ELT as a social and economic practice over the past two decades. In particular, rapid increases in the number and variety of language learners in educational institutions and new conceptions of the successful learner are already making the radical restructuring of language pedagogy, to which Allwright (1988) referred, a reality. In particular, autonomy-related practices have been widely accepted by ELT providers for reasons that often have little to do with fostering autonomy in learning. In this context, the concept of autonomy serves less as a focal point for educational reform and more as a means of identifying the interests of learners within this changing landscape of teaching and learning.

The nature of the changes to which I am referring is illustrated by two articles on British ELT published in the *Guardian Weekly*. In the first of these, Schellekens (2001) observed that, in the previous year, approximately 600,000 adults had come

to the UK to learn English and that a further 100,000 permanent settlers had received ELT. She also noted that 546,000 schoolchildren had been identified as speakers of English as an additional language, although the number actually receiving ELT support was not known. The implication of such figures is that very large numbers of individuals with varying needs (including ESL tourists, professionals, immigrants and their children, and asylum seekers) now receive ELT in a wide variety of commercial and non-commercial institutional contexts.

In this context, which has its parallels elsewhere in the world, language teaching institutions are increasingly open to “flexible” ways of meeting the diverse learning needs of growing student numbers. In a companion piece in the same issue of the *Guardian Weekly*, for example, Blue (2001) noted that many universities had recently created self-access multimedia resource centers and that, although English for academic purposes (EAP) classes still took place, “many students opt for independent language learning, either alongside support classes, or in some cases, as an alternative to attending classes” (p. 3). Distance learning, which increasingly involves Internet-based learning, is also an option for flexible delivery that is growing in importance—the Open University in the UK, for example, now offers foreign language diplomas to more than 5,000 distance students (Hurd, 2001). At the same time, there is a tendency for classroom-based courses to become shorter and more intensive. Whether these classroom courses are connected to some formalized process of independent learning or not, there is an increasing emphasis on support for independent learning as a legitimate use of classroom time.

The changing nature of the international labor market, combined with ideologies of globalization, the information age, and the knowledge economy is also leading to a focus on flexibility in learning. Successful learners are increasingly seen less as individuals who are responsive to instruction and more as individuals who are capable of instructing and training themselves. Little (1996) has noted, for example, a convergence between ideas of autonomy in learning and new management styles such as Total Quality Management. Learning-to-learn skills, in particular, are becoming a key theme of educational policy around the world. In Hong Kong, for example, the idea of learning to learn has been advertised on TV as one element in a proposed educational reform that is supported at the highest official levels (Benson, 2004).

One of the consequences of these changes is that autonomy-related practices and ideas are often imposed upon teachers from above. The reasons for change are often economic, either in the narrow sense of providing language learning opportunities at minimum cost or in the broader sense of a perceived need to meet the demands of changing labor markets. In this context, change may represent both an opportunity and a threat as valid concerns are raised about the quality of learning and the role of teachers in new modes of learning. Discussion of the concept of autonomy represents a way of making sense of these new modes of learning and of ensuring that their implementation genuinely serves the interests of their learners. Also, as Breen and Mann (1997) have suggested, interest in autonomy among teachers may be related to a much broader “sense that the locus of control over their work is shifting away from themselves and their immediate institutions to centralized bureaucracies.” (p. 16). Personal uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness, they argue, may well be leading teachers to “question the culture of ‘authority’ as it manifests itself towards the end of the century, including that which they themselves represent as teachers.”

To ascribe the current interest in autonomy in ELT exclusively to the success of the work of those who have advocated it in the past would therefore be a mistake. But it would be equally wrong to suggest that the idea of autonomy in learning has entirely lost its earlier radical character. The changing landscape of ELT presents us with a complex picture, in which the economic and pragmatic interests of ELT providers interact with teachers' perceptions of the nature of teaching and learning in the context of global debate over what it means to be an educated person in the twenty-first century. Within this changing and dynamic landscape, the concept of autonomy continues to play a role as a point of reference for the interests of the learner in ELT.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

A great deal of the research in the field of autonomy to date has focused on two questions: How should we define and describe autonomy? And how is autonomy best fostered through the teaching and learning process?

### *Defining Autonomy*

Research aimed at the definition of autonomy in learning is important for the simple reason that, if we are to foster autonomy, we need know what it is that we are trying to foster. Holec (1979/1981) defined autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). This often-quoted definition has stood the test of time and has worked well as a broad framework for research and practice. In order to define autonomy more delicately, however, we need to specify what *taking charge of one’s own language learning* means. Elaborating on his definition, Holec (p. 3) mentioned determining objectives, content, and progression, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired—the key behaviors involved in the self-management of learning. Other researchers, however, have placed greater emphasis on the psychological capacities underlying these behaviors. A later definition of autonomy offered by Little (1991, based on a much longer definition agreed upon at a conference in Bergen, Norway, and reprinted in Dam, 1995, pp. 1-2), for example, argues that

Autonomy is a *capacity*—for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts. (p. 4)

Researchers are, however, broadly agreed that autonomy involves abilities and capacities that are both behavioral and psychological. One of the problems in defining autonomy in any concise way, however, lies in the sheer number of abilities and capacities that could be listed under the heading of autonomy. Candy (1991, pp. 459-466), for example, has identified more than 100 competencies associated with autonomy in the literature. Ultimately, there is also a concern that any competency associated with good learning could be listed as a competency involved in autonomy.

One alternative to attempting to define the construct of autonomy precisely is to accept that it can take a variety of forms. Elsewhere, I have suggested that autonomy might be located in any combination of directly or indirectly observable behaviors in which control over an aspect of the learning process is displayed (Benson, 2001). I have also suggested that, in the context of language learning, these behaviors can be concerned with control over the management of learning, the cognitive processes involved in second language acquisition, or the content of learning. Although this does not solve the problem of concise definition, it does allow for the coexistence of differences of emphasis and for the identification of observable behaviors associated with autonomy through empirical research.

Little (1990, p. 7) has also provided us with a remarkably useful definition of what autonomy is not. He argues that autonomy is (a) not a synonym for self-instruction, (b) not a matter of letting learners get on with things as best they can, (c) not a teaching method, (d) not a single easily described behavior, and (e) not a steady state. This definition of what autonomy is not is probably more widely accepted within the field than any definition of what autonomy is! Its value lies, in part, in its emphasis on attributes of the learner, as opposed to the learning situation, and, in part, on its emphasis on the fact that autonomy is likely to be displayed variably both from learner to learner and from context to context.

### ***Fostering Autonomy***

One of the questions often asked of advocates of autonomy is whether greater autonomy, in fact, leads to more effective language learning. This is a legitimate question because, in the context of language learning programs, autonomy is rarely an end in itself. It is, however, important to make a distinction between two issues: the relationship between autonomy and learning and the effectiveness of our attempts to foster autonomy in practice.

On the first of these issues, Little (1994) argues that “all genuinely successful learning is in the end autonomous” (p. 341). Support for this argument is found principally within constructivist approaches to the theory of learning, where it is assumed that knowledge leading to a change in the learner’s systems of meaning is of a higher order than knowledge leading to the accumulation of facts or enhancement of skills. This higher-order knowledge, it is argued, cannot be taught and demands the learner’s active participation in the learning process. In the context of language learning, it could be argued, the genuinely successful learners are those who succeed in constructing the target language system as a system for the interpretation and communication of their own meanings, a process that necessarily involves some degree of control over management, acquisition, and content. Thus, if we assume that the goal of language teaching and learning is not simply the accumulation of facts and technical skills, autonomous language learning is, almost by definition, equivalent to effective language learning.

But this theoretical premise does not imply that our efforts to foster autonomy will necessarily lead to more effective language learning in practice. Our efforts are necessarily mediated through modes of learning of various kinds, and it is principally the effectiveness of these modes of learning in fostering autonomy that is open to question. Studies that have succeeded in empirically demonstrating the effectiveness of any mode of teaching of learning in fostering autonomy are, in fact, few, and, as Sinclair (1999) has pointed out, there is currently “little evidence to

suggest that learners who have followed a programme that promotes greater learner responsibility develop greater language proficiency than those who do not" (p. 97). One reason for this is that the assessment of gains in autonomy is problematic in itself. In particular, many of the psychological attributes associated with autonomy are not directly observable, and the display, or lack of display, of directly observable behaviors associated with self-management of learning can be misleading. Breen and Mann (1997, p. 52), for example, have suggested that learners who are explicitly expected to develop autonomy may simply "put on the mask of autonomous behaviour" in order to show they meet the goals of a course. Sinclair (1999), on the other hand, considers the case of a learner working on a reading task in a self-access, who gets up to ask the adviser on duty the meaning of a word. While this behavior may seem to represent a lack of autonomy, she argues, it could represent the opposite if it were the outcome of a careful consideration of various options for finding out the meaning of the word. The essence of autonomous behavior, in other words, does not lie in the behavior itself, but in the fact that it is authentic, self-initiated, and considered—factors that are extremely difficult to assess.

Researchers have, however, explored methods of measuring gains in autonomy with some degree of success. In a study of learners using self-instructional materials, for example, Rosewell and Libben (1994) devised an inventory of *autonomously controlled tasks* based on diary entries indicating when the learners deviated from the instructions in the materials. Simmons and Wheeler (1995) analyzed the discourse of meetings in which course content and procedures were discussed in order to find out the extent to which learners actually participated in the decision-making process. And Sinclair (1999) has devised a method of questioning students in order to discover the extent of their *metacognitive awareness*, or their awareness of the processes underlying their approach to learning tasks. Questions such as *What did you do?* and *What else could you have done?* might, for example, reveal more about the learner's capacity for autonomous behavior in the context of a task than direct observation of the way in which the task was actually performed. Each of these methods has succeeded in discriminating among individual learners and measuring change over time. At the same time, it should be emphasized that each method is context bound and measures a particular aspect of control over the learning process rather than the more global construct of autonomy itself.

Difficulties in assessing gains in autonomy clearly underlie difficulties in assessing the relationship between any such gains and language proficiency (to date the best indicator that we have of effective language learning). Important work in this area has, however, been carried out by Dam and Legenhausen, who found that students in autonomous classrooms in Denmark developed greater proficiency in aspects of vocabulary, grammar, and spoken communication than students in more traditional classrooms in Denmark and Germany (Dam & Legenhausen, 1996; Legenhausen, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). Although Dam and Legenhausen acknowledge that their results are problematic from an experimental point of view (in particular, the comparability of the groups observed is questionable), they do show conclusively that the attempts of Dam and her colleagues to foster autonomy are not harmful to their students' language learning. This conclusion is all the more significant because their work (described in detail in Dam, 1995), represents the single most sustained attempt to foster autonomy in language learning reported in

the literature to date. Much of the research in this area, it should be noted, is based on short-term interventions, which, if it is acknowledged that the development of autonomy is a long-term process, are unlikely to yield valid or reliable results.

## CURRENT DEBATES AND CONCERNS

Important as the evaluation of our attempts to foster autonomy may be, current debates within the field tend to be related more to developing theoretical and philosophical issues. Here, I will discuss three of these issues: the social dimensions of autonomy, learners' knowledge of the learning process, and teacher autonomy.

### *The Social Dimensions of Autonomy*

In its early days, the theory and practice of autonomy in language learning enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the notion of *individualization*, especially in collections of papers that covered both areas (Altman & James, 1980; Brookes & Grundy, 1988; Geddes & Sturtridge, 1982). The insistence that autonomy be defined as a capacity of the individual learner, an emphasis on methods of meeting individual needs, and the fact that the term *autonomy* was occasionally used loosely to describe situations in which learners studied on their own led to concern about an inherent individualism within the concept. Countering this concern, more recent work has tended to stress the social character of autonomy. Kohonen (1992), for example, has argued that autonomy involves "being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways" (p. 19), while Little (1996) has argued that "a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions" is central to autonomy (p. 210).

Concerns about social dimensions of autonomy have largely been addressed in the context of a shift in the locus of the practice away from self-access and learner training towards classroom and curriculum-based approaches, including experiential learning (Kohonen, 1992, 2000), the process or negotiated syllabus (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000), project learning (Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Ribé & Vidal, 1993), and cooperative and collaborative learning (Littlewood, 2002). Debate has also begun on the more general nature of the social interactions within classroom and curriculum practice that are likely to foster autonomy. Crabbe (1993), for example, has emphasized the nature of the minute-by-minute interaction between teachers and learners in the classroom, while Kenny (1993) has emphasized the learner's role in the determination of curriculum tasks.

### *Learners' Knowledge of the Learning Process*

In its early days, the theory and practice of autonomy were also largely concerned with the self-management of learning. More recently emphasis has shifted towards the cognitive capacities involved in autonomous learning and in particular towards learners' knowledge. Important developments in this respect have been the forging of links between work on autonomy and work on learning strategies (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Dickinson, 1992; Wenden, 1991) and learner beliefs (Benson & Lor, 1998, 1999; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Riley, 1997; Wenden, 1995, 1998, 1999). The central assumption in research on learner beliefs is that systems of belief condition learning behavior. Cotterall (1995, p. 195) argues, therefore that the development of

autonomy in a behavioral sense implies changes in the learner's beliefs. The area of learner beliefs has been described by Riley as "rather untidy," and research to date has been dogged by difficulties in defining exactly what beliefs about language learning are and how they are related to behavior. Research on metacognitive knowledge and conceptions of language learning offers some potential for a more systematic understanding of these issues.

The construct of *metacognitive knowledge* derives from work in the field of educational psychology by Flavell (1979). Wenden (1995) uses the term to describe the "stable, stable and sometimes fallible knowledge learners acquire about themselves as learners and the learning process" (p. 185). Metacognitive knowledge constitutes a specialized portion of the learner's knowledge base in regard to a particular subject matter and is distinct from the learner's knowledge of its content. Flavell classifies this knowledge in terms of three categories of *person*, *task*, and *strategic knowledge*. In the context of language learning, person knowledge includes general knowledge of factors that facilitate or inhibit learning and specific knowledge of the ways in which these factors apply in the learner's own experience. Task knowledge involves knowledge of the purpose, nature, and demands of the tasks involved in learning a language. Strategic knowledge involves general knowledge of what language learning strategies are and specific knowledge about how and when to use them (Wenden, 1998). The importance of the construct of metacognitive knowledge lies in an assumption that it is learners' knowledge of the language learning process that underlies their ability to employ the planning, monitoring, and evaluation strategies that are associated with autonomous learning behavior. "If they fail to make contact with a rich knowledge base," she argues, "these three strategies are weak" (pp. 518-519).

The construct of conceptions of language learning also derives from work in field of educational psychology by Marton and his associates. According to Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty (1993), a conception of learning refers to a distinct conception of the ontological status of learning, or what the objects and processes involved in learning are from the learner's point of view. Research by Benson and Lor (1998, 1999) has suggested that conceptions of learning may be also contextualized within conceptions of the phenomena towards which learning efforts are directed. In other words, learners' conceptions of what the target language is and what the process of learning it involves will tend to condition specific beliefs about language learning.

The constructs of metacognitive knowledge and conceptions of language learning both point to the importance of the development of learners' knowledge of the learning process in the development of autonomy. Also, because both of these constructs have been shown to be describable on the basis of learners' accounts of their learning, they appear to hold considerable potential for a better understanding of the long-term processes involved in the development of autonomy and of learners' responses to our attempts to foster autonomy through the teaching and learning process.

### ***Teacher Autonomy***

A third important area of current debate concerns the role of teachers in the development of learner autonomy. Discussion of teacher autonomy has two major



origins. First, it has long been clear that in order to foster autonomy, teachers must possess capacities that correspond in some sense to those that they expect to develop within their learners. The ways in which these capacities are translated into teaching behavior has therefore become a matter of concern (Crabbe, 1993; Little, 1995; Voller, 1997). Second, as the theory and practice of autonomy has matured, it has become a matter of concern within teacher education, where it is strongly linked to the idea of the teacher as *reflective practitioner* (Lamb, 2000; McGrath, 2000; Thavenius, 1999; Vieira, 1999). As Aoki (2002) points out, teacher autonomy may mean one of two things: teachers' ability to help their learners towards autonomy, or their freedom to exercise their professional competence and judgment to teach what and how they think best. This second aspect of teacher autonomy, which involves what have been described as *constraints on autonomy*, is linked to the first aspect because teachers often find that constraints on their freedom restrict their opportunities to foster autonomy among their learners. Although Benson (2000) has made an initial attempt to model constraints on teacher autonomy (which range from immediate conditions of employment to broader issues concerned with methods and ideologies of teaching and learning), there is considerable potential for future research in this area.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The three areas of debate and concern discussed in the previous section are perhaps indicative of a fundamental shift in the focus of theory and practice in the field of autonomy that is likely to continue in the future. At the root of this shift is the fact that autonomy is now seen less as a clearly definable goal that can be achieved through clearly definable methods, and more as a guiding concept that is relevant to varied fields of practice within ELT. Better understanding of the social dimensions of autonomous learning, in particular, has established the relevance of the idea of autonomy to a wide range of modes of teaching and learning. Research into learners' knowledge of the learning process and teacher autonomy is also important in this respect because it helps us to understand both the roles in which learners and teachers are cast within particular modes of teaching and learning and the possibilities for modifying these roles. In this sense, the idea of autonomy serves as a compass within changing and increasingly varied landscapes of teaching and learning. The questions that researchers are now asking, therefore, are much less concerned with the modes of practice that are most likely to foster autonomy, and much more concerned with the possibilities for any given mode of practice to lead either in the broad direction of autonomy or away from it. In view of this development, we see considerable potential for dialogue between researchers in the field of autonomy and researchers in other fields of ELT in the future.

One aspect of this dialogue is likely to involve further development of research into the qualitative nature of teacher-learner interaction and the experience of language learning and language teaching. Here we may perhaps expect the field of autonomy to benefit especially from fields such as classroom interaction and teacher education, in which participatory, ethnographic, reflective, biographical methods have been used. We may also expect greater emphasis in research on the long-term development of autonomy as we begin to investigate the ways in which learners move through varied contexts of learning in the course of their language learning careers and the ways in which their knowledge and identities develop (see, for

example, Benson & Nunan, 2002, 2004). This emphasis will inevitably lead us to pay much greater attention to out-of-class learning, an area that has, perhaps surprisingly, attracted little attention in the field of autonomy in the past. Here, links with sociocultural and critical perspectives on language learning may also be forged as we begin to look more closely at relationships between the long-term development of autonomy and social contexts of learning.

A second aspect of this dialogue is likely to involve greater prominence for the idea of autonomy in other fields of language learning research. When the idea of autonomy enters other fields, it often does so as a potential guiding concept for theory and practice. This has already been seen, for example, in the fields of strategy training (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Wenden, 1991), computer-assisted language learning (e.g., Healy, 1999; Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996), the learner-centered approach (e.g., Nunan, 1996, 1997), communicative language learning (Breen & Mann, 1997; Littlewood, 1997, 1999), and motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Ushioda, 1996). The inclusion of a chapter on autonomy in Nation's (2001) recent book on vocabulary learning, however, represents a new departure and perhaps the promise that the idea of autonomy will become as pervasive within the broader field of language learning as ideas such as communication and authenticity have become in the past.

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