

Three Versions of Learner Autonomy and their Implications for English-Medium Degree Programmes

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Abstract This chapter outlines and discusses three versions of the concept of learner autonomy. The first, central to the Council of Europe's project on adult education in the 1970s, embeds "self-learning" in the interactive, dialogic processes of group work. The second version, elaborated by Henri Holec for the Council of Europe's parallel project on adult language learning, is closely associated with the first but is exclusively cognitive-organizational and individual in its orientation; and it treats the development of learner autonomy and the growth of proficiency in the target language as separate processes. This version had a major impact on universities' understanding of autonomous language learning: students working on their own in a self-access centre, probably a language laboratory. The third version of learner autonomy is concerned with classroom language learning. Developed by Leni Dam as a set of practical procedures, it shares with the first version the view that learning is a social-interactive as well as an individual-cognitive process; and because from the beginning the target language is the principal medium of classroom communication, it sees the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency as inextricably linked. The chapter concludes by considering the implications of these three versions of learner autonomy for English-medium programmes at non-English-speaking universities.

Keywords Learner autonomy • Self-learning • Self-direction • Logbook • Interaction • Collaboration • Reflection • Evaluation • Feedback

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1 Autonomy in Adult Education: A Council of Europe Project

It is generally acknowledged that the concept of learner autonomy was first introduced to the world of language teaching and learning by Henri Holec in his report *Autonomy and foreign language learning*, published by the Council of Europe in 1979 (the report is cited here as Holec 1981). However, although Holec is explicitly concerned with adult language learners, discussion of his arguments has rarely referred to the broader adult education context in which they took shape. It is important to know something about that context because it promoted ideas that are highly relevant to the concerns of the present chapter but were only partly taken over by Holec. My source for what follows in this section is the report *Organisation, content and methods of adult education*, compiled for the Council of Europe project of the same name by Henri Janne (1977). The views that for brevity's sake are attributed to Janne are those of the project group as a whole.

To begin with, as Janne explains (1977, pp. 13–14), adult education was important to Council of Europe member states for the contribution it could make to economic reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War. But unprecedented economic growth in the 1960s caused decision-making processes to become more complex, leading to the alienation of those affected by the decisions; while what Janne calls a “crisis of civilization” at the end of the decade helped to prompt a challenge to “the arbitrary division of human lives into ‘slices’ – work, leisure, family, community” (Janne 1977, p. 15). As a consequence, it was no longer possible to see adult education simply as “a remedy for a momentary imbalance in the ‘vocation-education’ relationship”; it assumed an altogether more complex role as “an integral part of the process of economic, political and cultural democratisation” (Janne 1977, p. 15). Adult education, in other words, came to be seen as “an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man [sic] ‘product of his society’, one moves to the idea of man ‘producer of his society’” (Janne 1977, p. 15). This view is fully harmonious, of course, with the Council of Europe’s foundational values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

According to Janne, a central goal of adult education was to bring about improvement in the quality of life. This depended on the achievement of four objectives: equality of opportunity, responsible autonomy, personal fulfilment, and the democratization of education (Janne 1977, p. 17). The last of these objectives was understood to be a matter of giving adults the opportunity to compensate for deficiencies in their schooling, but also of “fostering a new type of cultural production by taking the real problems of everyday life into account in carrying out the educational process” (Janne 1977, pp. 17–18). This is a rather oblique way of saying that adult education should be responsive to learners’ needs and should acknowledge the contribution that learners’ existing knowledge, skills and experience can make to the educational process.

The exercise of responsible autonomy entails self-management, which means that the educational process must be based on “self-learning”, a process that is guided and supported by a teacher working in an institutional framework (“self-learning” is contrasted with “self-teaching” [Janne 1977, p. 53], which dispenses with teacher and institution). Self-learning “generally refers to the practice of working in groups, and to the choice by participants of objectives, curriculum content and working methods and pace” (Janne 1977, p. 27). Group work may serve “as the basis for the entire educational process, from definition of needs to evaluation” (Janne 1977, p. 31). It “enables every individual to take part and, better still, to learn how to take part” (Janne 1977, p. 31), and it “implies the possibility of dialogue (in other words, self-learning must be the result of an interpersonal dialectical dialogue)” (Janne 1977, p. 53). “The actual work of learning, the acquisition of subject-matter and content, implies a personal contribution (past experience, previous knowledge) which is pooled in the group, as well as the help and assistance of a teacher” (Janne 1977, p. 53). The teacher’s assistance “should increasingly become the servant of self-evaluation, an aptitude which must be one of the greatest gains in any adult education process (autonomy)” (Janne 1977, p. 20).

With this ideal of adult education in mind I turn now to a brief consideration of Henri Holec’s contribution.

2 Henri Holec’s Contribution: Learner Autonomy as Cognitive and Organizational Self-Management

Holec’s definition of learner autonomy has been fundamental to discussion of the concept since his report was first published: “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec 1981, p. 3). This, he explains, entails responsibility for “fixing the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting the methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the acquisition procedure; evaluating what has been acquired” (Holec 1981, p. 9). The Council of Europe’s first modern languages projects were carried out under the aegis of the Committee for Out-of-School Education. Accordingly, in his introduction Holec establishes the link between his report and the Council’s adult education project, quoting what Janne has to say about “arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man” and contributing towards “the improvement of the quality of life” (Holec 1981, p. 1). There is, however, a major difference between the two reports. As we have seen, Janne associates self-learning with group work and “interpersonal dialectical dialogue” (Janne 1977, p. 53). Holec, on the other hand, defines the autonomous learner in individual terms, and his account of the exercise of self-management in learning is entirely cognitive-organizational. There is no mention of interaction or collaboration with other learners, and no mention of the knowledge, skills and experience that any adult learner brings to the language learning process.

Janne argued that the democratization of adult education has consequences for the kind of knowledge that is acquired (“a new type of cultural production” [Janne 1977, p. 17]), and Holec made a similar argument in relation to autonomous language learning. If learners themselves determine the goals and content of learning, “objective, universal knowledge is [...] replaced by subjective, individual knowledge”: “the learner is no longer faced with an ‘independent’ reality [...], to which he cannot but give way, but with a reality which he himself constructs and dominates” (Holec 1981, p. 21). Holec’s use of the verb “construct” evidently refers to explicit procedures rather than implicit processes, to learner initiative, choice and control rather than the unconscious and involuntary workings of cognition. But elsewhere in his report he notes the understanding of language learning that was beginning to emerge from empirical research at the end of the 1970s: “an active, creative operation by means of which the learner converts into acquired knowledge information provided for him in an organised manner (teaching) or in non-organised form (‘natural’ untreated information)” (Holec 1981, p. 23).

According to Holec, the ability to take charge of one’s own learning is “not inborn but must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way” (Holec 1981, p. 3). This leads him to identify two quite distinct objectives for language teaching: to help learners to achieve their linguistic and communicative goals on the one hand and to become autonomous in their learning on the other. He notes: “This raises the problem of how far the methods adopted to achieve the first objective and to achieve the second objective are compatible” (Holec 1981, p. 23). He envisages, for example, that “programmed instruction” might help learners to “acquire a knowledge of a language” but “would nevertheless place [them] in a position of dependence and irresponsibility such as would immediately conflict with [their] aim of achieving autonomy” (Holec 1981, p. 23). For Holec, developing proficiency in a foreign language and becoming an autonomous learner are evidently separate processes. The teacher’s task is always to promote learning of the target language; and when learner autonomy is part of the overall learning objective, the teacher acquires a second task, to help learners make the transition from *teacher-directed* to *self-directed* learning.

At the end of the 1970s Holec’s notion of “a learning structure in which control over the learning can be exercised by the learner” (1981, p. 7) coincided with the need to respond to the challenges and potential of emerging technologies and helped to stimulate a rapid growth of interest in self-access language learning, especially in universities. His strongly individualistic conception of learner autonomy perfectly fitted the technology available at that time. Especially in universities, autonomous learning quickly came to be understood as something that took place in a language laboratory: individual learners wearing headphones sat in booths and worked with audio recordings of various kinds, sometimes supported by printed materials. This view still predominates in many quarters, though language laboratories have long since been replaced by computer networks. Holec’s view of learner autonomy as one organizational option among others lives on in the notion of “readiness for autonomy” (e.g., Cotterall 1995; Chan 2001; Ming and Alias 2007); while those interested in measuring learner autonomy independently of target language

proficiency (e.g., Benson 2010; Lamb 2010) follow him in assuming that language learning and becoming an autonomous learner are separate, or at least separable, processes.

Learner autonomy as a determining characteristic of classroom language learning presents a very different picture, as a consideration of Leni Dam's contribution will show.

3 Leni Dam's Contribution: Learner Autonomy in the Language Classroom

Leni Dam's version of learner autonomy (Dam 1995) also began to take shape in the 1970s with young Danish teenagers learning English, and superficially it has much in common with Holec's. Within the framework provided by the official curriculum, her learners set their own goals, choose their own learning activities and materials, monitor the learning process, and evaluate learning outcomes. There are, however, three significant differences. First, learners are required to manage their own learning not in order to be able to dispense with their teacher, but because *self-direction* produces the most effective learning. From first to last the teacher has an indispensable role to play as expert guide and manager of the learning environment and its three-phase work cycle – making plans, implementing them, and evaluating outcomes (cf. Janne's notion that self-learning requires expert guidance). Secondly, language learning is seen not only in individual and cognitive terms but also as a social phenomenon grounded in *interaction* and *collaboration*. Group work is fundamental, and the developing proficiency of each member of the class is a resource available to all other members (this recalls Janne's "interpersonal dialectical dialogue" [Janne 1977, p. 53]). Thirdly, from the beginning the target language is the principal medium of *all* classroom communication: discussing and agreeing on learning goals, selecting and carrying out learning activities, evaluating learning outcomes. In other words, from the beginning the target language in its metacognitive as well as its communicative function is the channel through which the learners' agency is required to flow. The development of their autonomy is thus inseparable from the growth of their *target language proficiency* (for a detailed description of Dam's classroom practice, see Dam 1995).

Dam's approach is underpinned by two pedagogical tools, logbooks and posters. Learners use their logbook (a plain notebook) to record the agenda and content of each lesson, plans for homework, and words and phrases that they need to memorise. The logbook is also the place where they write short texts of various kinds and regularly evaluate learning outcomes (the longer texts produced by group projects are kept in a portfolio). Over several years learners fill a number of logbooks, which provide a cumulative record of their growth as learners but also as users of the target language. It is by no means the least important function of the logbook that it helps

to overcome the inescapably fragmentary and episodic nature of all classroom learning.

Whereas the logbook supports individual learning, posters (written on large sheets of paper and pinned to the classroom wall) 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 needed 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. There are two arguments for using posters rather than the blackboard or interactive 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 interactive whiteboard. In due course, learners themselves use posters to support the management of project work, for example by listing the roles and responsibilities of the various project members and recording progress.

Learning activity in the autonomy classroom has two main focuses: the creation of target language texts that reflect learners' interests and thus give learning a here-and-now purpose and relevance; and the production of learning materials (word cards, dominoes, board games, etc.; for further information see Dam 1995), which encourages intentional, analytic learning and helps to develop awareness of linguistic form. Both kinds of activity are managed by the learners themselves, but with guidance from the teacher and regular evaluation. Especially when learners have ceased to be beginners, it is often difficult to maintain a clear separation between intentional learning activities and creative text production (cf. the ambitious vocabulary learning project, based on one of the Harry Potter novels, reported by Thomsen [2003]); and because everything that happens in the autonomy classroom happens in and through the target language, the skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing develop in interaction with one another.

A language learning environment that seeks to implement this version of learner autonomy assigns a key role to learners' identity; understands that we respond to the motivational problem by exploiting learners' intrinsic motivation; makes use of their existing linguistic knowledge and communicative competence; insists that from the beginning they exercise agency in and through the target language; develops their metacognitive proficiency in the target language through reflection and evaluation; recognises that learning is not all inside the head – it is a social and physical as well as a cognitive phenomenon; and uses logbooks, posters and a wide variety of target language products to construct and maintain a narrative of individual and collective learning. This understanding of learner autonomy assumes that proficiency in any language gradually *emerges* from communicative and metacognitive language use, and that language *development* is a matter of autopoiesis, of spontaneous, autonomous unfolding and self-organization. In recent years these assumptions have become increasingly prominent in theories of second language acquisition (see, e.g., Larsen-Freeman 2011; Verspoor et al. 2011).

As a theoretical construct (see, e.g., Little 2007) this version of learner autonomy has been nourished by extensively documented classroom practice that goes back to the 1970s (e.g., Dam 1995; Dam and Lentz 1998; Thomsen and Gabrielsen 1991). It has also been the focus of longitudinal research that explored the development of a group of autonomous Danish learners' proficiency in L2 English over 4 years from a variety of perspectives, including the acquisition of vocabulary, target language grammar, and pragmatic competence. In each of these dimensions the Danish learners outperformed a control group of German learners who were being taught English using a "communicative" textbook (see, e.g., Dam and Legenhausen 1996, 1999, 2010, 2011; Legenhausen 1999a, b, c, 2001, 2003).

In principle, Leni Dam's radical approach can be adapted to the needs of language learners in any environment, regardless of their age and proficiency level. It has, for example, been successfully applied to the design and delivery of foreign language modules in Trinity College Dublin's institution-wide language programme (Little and Ushioda 1998) and intensive English language courses for adult refugees admitted to Ireland (Little 2009). The next section of the chapter suggests some reasons for the success of the approach, focusing in turn on motivation, goal-setting and feedback, interaction and reflection, and the role of writing.

4 Learner Autonomy in the Language Classroom: Why Does It Succeed?

Autonomy is central to human experience from a very early stage, as Salmon (1998, p. 24) has pointed out:

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.

This helps to explain why, according to self-determination theory, autonomy is one of three basic motivational needs that we must satisfy in order to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment. Deci (1996, p. 2) argues that we are autonomous when we are "fully willing to do what [we] are doing and [we] embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment". The other two basic needs are for competence and relatedness. We have a feeling of competence when we confront and successfully overcome "optimal challenges" (Deci 1996, p. 66); and we experience connectedness when we love and are loved by others (Deci 1996, p. 88). According to self-determination theory, then, the freedom that autonomy entails is confirmed by our competence and constrained by our dependence. Applied to classrooms, the theory predicts that learners who are autonomous will be fulfilled and thus motivated learners. It also predicts that their autonomy will be undermined if they do not

feel that their learning effort is worthwhile for its own sake and as a contribution to the progress of the class as a whole.

Worthwhile learning is a matter of setting and achieving appropriate goals. Csikszentmihalyi has put the matter thus: “A goal is necessary so that we may get feedback on our actions, so that at any given moment we know how well we are doing in terms of the goal. Without a goal, there cannot be meaningful feedback, and without knowing whether we are doing well or not, it is very difficult to maintain involvement” (1990, p. 129). As Hattie and Timperley remind us (2007, p. 82), in order to serve a learning function “feedback needs to provide information specifically relating to the task or process of learning that fills a gap between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood”. In practical terms, it needs to answer three questions: Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? (Hattie and Timperley 2007, pp. 88–90). In the autonomy classroom, where learners share responsibility for generating feedback with the teacher, the same three questions drive the recursive cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation. The first and third phases of the cycle are explicitly reflective, while the second is accompanied by reflection in the form of continuous monitoring. At the same time, all three phases entail interaction – between the teacher and the whole class, the teacher and groups of learners, the teacher and individual learners, and learners working in pairs or groups. All this interaction takes place as far as possible in the target language: although reflection may end as thought in the individual learner’s head, it starts as exploratory talk. This practice brings together two strands of pedagogical theory that are supported by a substantial body of empirical research. One strand is concerned with general pedagogy and emphasises the communicative basis of learning and the importance of engaging learners in talk that enables them to explore, understand and appropriate new knowledge (see, for example, Barnes 1976; Mercer and Littleton 2007; Mercer and Hodgkinson 2008; Wells 2009). The other strand is concerned with language learning and attributes a key role to interaction and the negotiation of meaning in second language acquisition (e.g., Long 1996; Mackey 2012; Mackey et al. 2012).

If communicative and metacognitive use of the target language is the first-order tool that we use to create an autonomous language learning environment, the second-order tools by which we mediate the first-order tool are logbooks, posters, learner-created learning materials, and learner-generated texts (for further discussion from a Vygotskian perspective, see Little 2013). The skilful introduction of these second-order tools, all of which entail writing, is what makes it possible for learners to be agents of their own learning *through the target language* from the very beginning. Logbooks in particular play a key role. Maintaining a logbook is itself an act of learning; at the same time, logbooks are a manifestation not only of their owners’ developing proficiency but of their emerging identity as users of the target language. More generally, sustained use of logbooks and posters entails a continuous shuttling back and forth between writing and speaking: written notes provide a basis for speech, and in the early stages of learning help to compensate for the limitations of short-term memory; posters are produced by interaction between the teacher and learners, and the collaborative talk that constitutes group work can

be used to generate written text. Writing in order to speak and speaking in order to write are the means by which autonomous learners construct their proficiency in the target language, both as individuals and as a learning community.

In other words, the third version of learner autonomy depends on the same interactive, communicative and metacognitive processes that, according to general pedagogical theory, are apt to develop responsible, reflective and self-managing learners in and through their first language. In many parts of the world, however, the language of schooling is a second language for large numbers of learners, so that mastery of curriculum content and the development of proficiency in the language of schooling are two sides of the same coin. The same is true for the majority of students who opt to take English-medium degree programmes at non-English-speaking universities. This consideration provides a bridge to the final section of the chapter.

5 Learner Autonomy and English-Medium Degree Programmes

The trend for universities in non-English-speaking countries to teach degree programmes through the medium of English prompts the question: If students are non-native speakers of the language through which they are pursuing their studies, what kind of language support should they receive? One answer to the question might be to provide them with modules in English for Specific Purposes in order to develop their proficiency relative to the content of the curriculum they are following. Universities that still associate learner autonomy primarily with self-access language learning might also provide students with opportunities for supplementary self-study. But the first and third versions of learner autonomy discussed in this chapter demand an approach that is altogether more radical.

The first version of learner autonomy associates “self-learning” with interaction and collaboration, and assumes that learners in adult education are active and responsible agents whose knowledge, skills and experience are directly relevant to the learning process. According to this view, the most effective way of meeting the needs of adult learners is to secure their full engagement in all aspects of the learning process – “objectives, curriculum content and working methods and pace” (Janne 1977, p. 27). Universities, however, define their activities in terms of academic disciplines, which to begin with are likely to be virgin territory for students, even when their chosen course appears to be continuous with one or more of the subjects they took at school. The idea that students should be involved in negotiation of objectives, curriculum content and working methods may thus seem wholly unrealistic. In the relevant research literature there is nevertheless widespread agreement that the most effective and successful students are self-regulating: “Even though there is disagreement over the precise definition of student-centred learning, the core assumptions are active engagement in learning and learner responsibility

for the management of learning” (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006, p. 200). This invites the question: What steps should universities take to secure their students’ active engagement and their willing and explicit acceptance of responsibility for their learning?

John Biggs’s concept of “constructive alignment”, most recently elaborated by Biggs and Tang (2011), offers one answer to this question. Biggs has developed a powerful heuristic for constructively aligning university curricula, teaching/learning activities, assessment tasks, and assessment criteria. Intended learning outcomes – the competences students are required to develop – are defined at four levels: the best outcomes that can reasonably be expected, highly satisfactory outcomes, moderately satisfactory outcomes, and minimally satisfactory outcomes. Verbs are used to define the competences for each level (among those for the highest level, for example, we find *hypothesize, reflect, relate to principle*); the objects of these verbs define curriculum content; assessment tasks are designed to elicit the processes captured in the “competence” verbs; and task performance is rated according to criteria related to the different competence levels (for a schematic overview, see Biggs and Tang 2011, p. 105).

This necessarily brief summary of constructive alignment serves to remind us that knowledge is inseparable from the communicative processes by which we acquire and express it; and within higher education there is a wealth of empirical research to support the view that successful learning is an interactive process rooted in “interpersonal dialectical dialogue” (Janne 1977, p. 53). Much of that research is in the tradition that I referred to briefly in Sect. 4 (for further references see, e.g., Biggs and Tang 2011), and it points to an approach to learning and teaching that is closely similar to the one developed by Leni Dam for her teenage learners of English: an approach that engages directly with what students already know, finds ways of exploiting and building on their intrinsic motivation, requires them to accept responsibility for the management of their learning, ensures that curriculum content is delivered interactively, and encourages group as well as individual reflection within a framework of regular evaluation and formative assessment. Dam’s learners achieved high levels of proficiency in English partly because they were co-responsible for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating their learning – processes that were at once interactive and reflective, communicative and metacognitive – and partly because writing was used to support these processes in ways that enabled the learners to channel their agency through the target language.

The implications of this argument for English-medium programmes are twofold. First, it is not enough simply to “translate” existing courses into English. English-medium programmes need to be designed from the bottom up paying particular attention to: (i) the role that language plays in expressing, accessing, critically scrutinizing, and further developing knowledge of all kinds; (ii) the modes of linguistic communication in which these processes are to be enacted; and (iii) the kinds of support that non-native speakers of English will need in order to participate and benefit to the maximum of their potential. Secondly, because most university departments are not used to thinking about the courses they teach in these terms, specialists in language teaching/learning should be fully involved in the design of

English-medium programmes to ensure that they meet the pedagogical criteria I have summarized; for only thus will they be in a position to design and deliver appropriate supplementary and remedial language support.

Questions for Reflection on Future Teaching Practice

1. Theories of learner autonomy emphasize the importance of exploiting the knowledge, skills and experience that learners bring with them. How do you aim to do this in your teaching?
2. Some theorists assume that the development of learner autonomy is separable from the development of L2 proficiency, whereas others argue that the two processes are in fact one and the same. Which view do you find more convincing? And how does the view you favour impact on your teaching?
3. The success of autonomous learning environments has been attributed to systematic use of the target language for metacognitive as well as communicative purposes. How do you support your students in the metacognitive use of their target language?
4. Documentation of the learning process is fundamental to learner self-management. In Leni Dam's practice individual learners use logbooks to record their learning, and posters created collaboratively by teacher and students capture the learning of the group as a whole. How do you respond to the challenge of documentation in your teaching?
5. It is generally agreed that feedback plays an essential role in any effective teaching/learning process. In autonomous learning environments learners share with their teacher the responsibility for generating and exploiting feedback. How do you generate and exploit feedback in your classroom?
6. It is fundamental to the concept of learner autonomy that learners are fully involved in setting objectives, selecting curriculum content and deciding on working methods. How do you involve your learners in these processes?
7. To what extent does your approach to teaching
 - engage directly with what your students already know;
 - find ways of exploiting and building on their intrinsic motivation;
 - require them to accept responsibility for the management of their learning;
 - ensure that curriculum content is delivered interactively; and
 - encourage group as well as individual reflection within a framework of regular evaluation and formative assessment?

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