

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING: DIFFERENT VIEWS AND USE OF COMPUTERS

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The renewed interest of the last twenty years in learner autonomy among language professionals has been linked to technological developments in education. Yet, while the concepts and principles associated with learner autonomy underpin a broad range of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) applications and research projects, current research paradigms in CALL do not provide adequate tools and models to investigate in depth the development and exercise of learner autonomy in technology rich language learning environments. This Paper proposes a conceptual framework, rooted in activity theory and substantiated by empirical evidence, for describing and analysing the development and exercise of learner autonomy in technology-rich language learning environments. Through a particular focus on systemic tensions occurring as the activity unfolds, the dynamics between collective activity and individual actions are explored in the case of two real life language courses.

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Bringing together the activity theoretical arguments and the empirical findings, it is proposed that:

- 1) The language curriculum promoting learner autonomy is object-centred;
- 2) Emerging systemic tensions are key factors potentially promoting or preventing the development and exercise of learner autonomy in language learning activities. The most important systemic tensions for the development of learner autonomy in technology-rich language learning environments reside in the tool-object characteristics of language and technology and within the organisation of the division of labour;
- 3) The capacity to resolve contradictions is an observable attribute of learner autonomy. The potential for the development and exercise of learner autonomy is enhanced by the activity system capacity to resolve its systemic tensions in expansive ways, i.e. through the creation and adoption of new tools and procedures by the participants.

Many university students enjoy state-of-the art computing facilities, including access to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) artefacts and tools available in language centres or other self-access facilities. In the case of language learning, many institutions have reorganised the delivery of language instruction to maximise the use of these facilities, and in some cases, to reduce staffing costs.

However, the learning experience and outcomes in such environments are not always as expected: students may fail to use the facilities available to them, language teachers may show some resistance towards new approaches to language teaching and learning, and university authorities may be reluctant to provide adequate support, technical or otherwise. Despite these difficulties, CALL is thriving and many enthusiast teachers continue to develop materials, which they then integrate into their everyday teaching practice. For many, the use of computers in language learning is linked, explicitly or implicitly, to the development and exercise of learner autonomy. Yet, while concepts and principles associated with learner autonomy underpin a broad range of CALL applications and research projects, CALL researchers do not always avail

themselves of adequate tools and models to investigate the development and exercise of learner autonomy in all their complexity.

The first representation of autonomy conveyed by dictionaries or encyclopaedias is political: autonomy is the capacity to make one's own laws and to obey them. However, the notion of autonomy cannot be fully grasped just within the political domain. Many representations of autonomy can be found, which have their origins in different traditions, historical contexts, disciplines, or perspectives. Philosophers may discuss the notion of autonomy in relation to that of autarky or self-sufficiency while stressing the role of obedience in so far that law and freedom but two sides of the same coin. Psychologists may view autonomy as a capacity for action without intervention from others. Educationalists may strive towards a system that allows learning to take place without the intervention of teachers or outside the limits of a fixed curriculum. Yet, central to the concept of autonomy in all its representations, and despite this apparent diversity of interpretations, are the notions of independence from external constraints and the capacity to make decisions. Autonomy is inherently ambiguous, if not paradoxical. Autonomy cannot be exercised outside boundaries that are externally determined by law, rules or constraints, autonomy is not anarchy. It is both a social and individual construct. Autonomy is a matter both for the community, whose laws have to be adhered to and a matter for the person who has to make choices and take responsibility within this community.

Autonomy is both independence and interdependence.

Learner autonomy, defined as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", has been the focus of renewed interest in the last decade, both in the area of educational research in general and in applied linguistics in particular. This renewed interest in learner autonomy has also been linked to technological developments in education. This explores the concept of learner autonomy and its relationship to CALL as found in the literature. It attempts to provide a preliminary working definition of learner autonomy, which highlights its individual and social dimensions, and to assess the potential of current frameworks for understanding and analysing the relationship between CALL and the development of learner autonomy.

According to Benson and Voller , “the promotion of autonomy in language learning has links to developments elsewhere in the field of education and has been sustained and nourished by innovative work in the field of self-directed learning and self-access”. In turn, self-access and self-directed language learning, which is sometimes called independent learning, has been encouraged by the “growing role of technology in education” . Throughout the world, independent learning, which “involves learners taking responsibility for their own learning and developing effective learning strategies” , is perceived by many researchers and language teachers as providing a context “within which autonomy can be promoted and supported”. The expression independent learning has almost become synonymous with learner autonomy. Independent language learning environments present language learning opportunities that do not require the constant intervention of a teacher or that can be pursued outside the framework of an educational institution. In the mid-1990s, state-of-the art self access facilities were therefore seen by many higher education authorities as the ultimate answer to the ever-increasing cost of language teaching and learning. Language centres were set up whose mission was to deliver University Wide Language Programmes , also known as Languages for All. New teaching methodologies emerged that integrated face-to-face teaching and independent learning. While the first generation of language centres relied mainly on traditional technologies (e.g. print, audio- and video-tapes), subsequent generations have attempted to integrate computer-based technologies as essential resources to be made available to language learners. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and multimedia were soon said to open new doors to pedagogical innovation and to enhance the language learning experience. Indeed, at the turn of the millennium, telecommunication technologies were finding their way into foreign language teaching, thus enabling remote access to resources, teachers or peers . However, self-access centres largely remained underused as it soon became evident that the vast majority of students were unable to cope with the demands of independent learning further argues that many self-access language centres “have been established without any strong pedagogical rationale and it is often assumed, without any strong justification for the assumption, that self-access work will automatically lead to autonomy”. According to him, self-access may even be counter-productive:

One of the important lessons of the spread of self-access over the past three decades, however, is that there is no necessary relationship between self-instruction and the development of autonomy and that, under certain conditions, self-instructional modes of learning may even inhibit autonomy. One of the reasons for the difficulties met by approaches based on self-access could be related to the actual understanding of learner autonomy that is being implemented in relation to language learning. It is thus necessary to clarify what is meant by learner autonomy in the context of language learning. Some authors, whether from the field of language learning or that of education in general, view the development of autonomous individuals as “the long term goal of most, if not all, educational endeavours an educational goal” .Autonomous individuals “exhibit the qualities of moral, emotional and intellectual independence” and are able to “make their own decisions about what they think and do” .

However, showing an ‘ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ is not enough. For **Holec** , the autonomous learner is willing to and capable of setting aims and objectives, identifying strategies to reach the latter, and finally choosing criteria and using them for self-evaluation. This is echoed by **Wenden** , who describes the autonomous learner as “one who has acquired the strategies and knowledge to take some (if not yet all) responsibility for his/her language learning and is willing and self confident enough to do so”. Ability and willingness to take responsibility for one’s own learning also feature in **Macaro’s** definition:

[Autonomy] is an ability to take charge of one’s own language learning and an ability to recognise the value of taking responsibility for one’s own objectives, content, progress, method and techniques of learning. It is also an ability to be responsible for the pace and rhythm of learning and the evaluation of the learning process.

Benson prefers to adopt a simple and concise definition centred on the notion of control, which according to him, is easier to observe and to measure. He therefore defines autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s learning” . **Cotterall** takes a similar view when she defines autonomy as “the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning”. This capacity to take control of one’s learning is multidimensional and can be translated into three interdependent levels of control: control of learning management,

control of cognitive processes, and control over learning content . In the technical version, autonomy is defined as “the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention of a teacher”. The psychological version sees autonomy as “a capacity — a construct of attitudes and abilities — which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning” and the political one emphasises learner control “over the process and content of learning” . **Therefore, the technical version of autonomy requires learners to take control of the management of their learning, the psychological version implies that learners will demonstrate their ability and capacity to control their cognitive processes and the political version gives learners the opportunity to exercise control over the learning content.**

Benson acknowledges the fact that this framework is tentative since, “as an essentially political concept imported into applied linguistics, autonomy is a highly flexible notion that is easily adapted to different approaches” . The value of his effort, however, lies in his emphasis on the political implications of learner autonomy and on the interdependence between the different versions of autonomy. A political version of learner autonomy integrates the notion of self-government, and a psychological approach includes the concept of self-regulation . Self government is generally seen from the point of view of social groups or communities. Self-regulation on the other hand is often seen from the individual learner’s perspective. Benson’s arguments imply that social control over the learning process and content, or collective decision-making, influences and is being influenced by the individual learner’s capacity to control and manage her own learning. Consequently, taking charge of one’s own learning, or being in control of one’s learning, is both a social and an individual construct.

Benson points out that the terms autonomy and independence are often used interchangeably, which can create difficulties in discussing autonomy: When independence is used as a synonym of autonomy, its opposite is dependence, which implies excessive reliance on the direction of teachers or teaching materials. One problem with the use of this term, however, is that it can also be understood as the opposite of interdependence, which implies working together with teachers and other learners towards shared goals. Many researchers would argue that autonomy does imply interdependence.

It is indeed generally assumed that the learner is independent to the extent that he /she is capable of working on his /her own without help or direction from the teacher or tutor, and dependent otherwise. Such a definition of independence is connected to the notions of self-access and independent learning which in turn brings us to the concept of individualisation of the learning process. The latter can be achieved through the implementation of learner-centred methodologies. Learning how to learn becomes an integral part of the curriculum and various methodologies, inspired by findings from research on learning strategies, can be put in place. Such interpretations of autonomy as independence and individualisation can be problematic in at least two ways. Firstly, they constitute a reductive view of autonomy and secondly, they downplay the role of socialisation and interaction in the learning process, which are central to many modern learning theories. As indicated earlier, **Esch** warns against reducing learner autonomy to a set of learning skills “leading to the display of ‘autonomous behaviour’”. By focusing on the individual learner learning a language independently, decision-makers and teachers run the risk of promoting a technical version of autonomy, thus favouring the development of learner control of the management of learning over other aspects. **Brookfield** takes this view even further. For him, interpretations of autonomy that are reduced to such technical approaches often “centre on the idea that the learner is particularly skilled at setting objectives, locating resources, and designing learning strategies. It is a conception that equates autonomy with methodological expertise”. He then argues that: It is quite possible to exhibit the methodological attributes of self-directed learning in terms of designing and executing learning projects but to do so within a framework of narrow and unchallenged assumptions, expectations, and goals. Learning to be a good disciple, to be an efficient bureaucratic functionary, or to be an exemplary party member are all examples of projects in which the techniques of self-directed learning may be evident. In none of these projects, however, is there exhibited critical thought concerning other alternatives, options or possibilities.

It is indeed important to distinguish between activities that have been designed to promote learner autonomy and independence and those whose effect is to increase control over the learner. For Brookfield, “the most fully adult form of self-directed learning is one in which

critical reflection on the contingent aspects of reality, the exploration of alternative perspectives and meaning systems, and the alteration of personal and social circumstances are all present” .

The alteration of such circumstances cannot be done in isolation from those who share them and will more than likely entail some interaction with others. In other words, here again, autonomy cannot be conceived in independent and technical terms only. A political dimension, sometimes called ‘radical’, must underlie any attempt to foster learner autonomy, even in its most simplistic or technical form. Furthermore, concurring with Benson’s view presented earlier on , the recognition of the political nature of learner autonomy implies an acceptance of the social consequences of its exercise, i.e. the possible transformation of the social structure of the learning context, in terms of control and power, as well as the transformation of the content of learning.

Computers are often said to support learner independence and interdependence while facilitating and enabling the construction of knowledge about the target language and the development of language skills . However, language no longer exists independently of the computer as suggested by Warschauer who claims that “learning to read, write, and communicate in the electronic medium [is seen by language learners] as valuable in its own right” . Chapelle stresses that the notion of ‘communicative competence’ has changed over the years: “Language learners are entering a world in which their communicative competence will include electronic literacies, i.e. communication in registers associated with electronic communication.”

Shetzer and Warschauer go even further , Arguing that “flexible, autonomous, lifelong learning is essential to success in the age of information” , they redefine learner autonomy in terms of an electronic literacy approach to language learning: Autonomous learners know how to formulate research questions and devise plans to answer them. They answer their own questions through accessing learning tools and resources on-line and off-line. Moreover, autonomous learners are able to take charge of their own learning by working on individual and collaborative projects that result in communication opportunities in the form of presentations, Web sites, and traditional publications accessible to local and global audiences. Language professionals who have access to an Internet computer classroom are in a position to teach students valuable

lifelong learning skills and strategies for becoming autonomous learners. Benson argues, however, that “claims made for the potential of new technologies in regard to autonomy need to be evaluated against empirical evidence of the realisation of this potential in practice” . Indeed few studies give a thorough description of what learners do when they are in the process of becoming autonomous language learners and fewer still give a detailed description of the development or exercise of learner autonomy in a technology supported language environment. The relationship between CALL and learner autonomy is either discussed at a theoretical level or remains a starting point on which design principles and decisions are based , Similarly, CALL has often been criticised for the relative lack of empirical research on the impact of CALL on language learning or acquisition. Chapelle points out that “CALL has always been viewed by some as an experiment requiring scrutiny and justification beyond what is expected of evaluation of other classroom activities”. Arguing that “an evaluation has to result in an argument indicating in what ways a particular CALL task is appropriate for particular learners at a given time” ,Chapelle, identifies three levels of analysis for CALL evaluation: CALL software, teacher-planned CALL activities and learners’ performance during CALL activities. She also suggests that CALL evaluation should entail both judgemental and empirical analyses: These two methods provide different and complementary information both of which are relevant to CALL task evaluation. The judgemental analysis should examine characteristics of the software and task in terms of criteria drawn from research on SLA. The empirical analyses address the same criteria but through data gathered to reveal the details of CALL use and learning outcomes.