Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy and the European Language Portolio

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Learner autonomy

Defining learner autonomy
- Learners take their first step towards autonomy when they recognize that they are responsible for their own learning (Holec 1979, Little 1991)
- They exercise that responsibility through their involvement in all aspects of the learning process – planning, implementing, evaluating (ibid.)
- Their autonomy grows as a result of their never-ending effort to understand the WHY, the WHAT and the HOW of their learning (Dam 1995)
- Learner autonomy entails a variety of self-regulatory behaviours that develop – *through practice* – as a *fully integrated* part of the knowledge and skills that are the goal of learning
- Thus in formal language learning the development of autonomy requires that learners use the target language at once as medium of classroom communication, channel of learning, and tool for reflection.

Some clarifications
- According to this definition an autonomous learner is a maximally successful learner
- In principle learner autonomy can develop within any organizational framework
- Learner autonomy is not necessarily the same thing as autonomous learning
- Autonomy is not synonymous with autism: it is not a matter of learners working on their own; like all other culturally determined human capacities, it develops in interaction with others

Educational arguments for learner autonomy: overcoming alienation
- Dewey (1916): *Democracy and Education* is not an accidental title
- Tharp and Gallimore (1988): getting away from "recitation script"
- Barnes (1976): bringing *action knowledge* to bear on *school knowledge* and vice versa
- Vygotsky (1986): the interaction of *spontaneous concepts* and *scientific concepts*

Psychological arguments: learner autonomy has deep roots
- In child development: autonomy is the goal of developmental learning: Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD leads to "independent problem solving"
- In social psychology: our sense of well being depends on our sense of competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci 1995)
- In contexts of formal learning, fostering learner autonomy is a matter of *making explicit* what might otherwise remain unconscious

Learner autonomy is real
- The examples of Leni Dam (1995) and Hanne Thomsen (Thomsen and Gabrielsen 1991; Thomsen 2003)
- Teaching ESL to non-English-speaking pupils in Irish primary schools (Integrate Ireland Language and Training; Lazenby Simpson 2003a)
- Teaching ESL to adults with refugee status (Integrate Ireland Language and Training; Lazenby Simpson 2003b)
- Two examples: Danish learners after four years of English (Dam and Little 1999)

Teacher autonomy

Teachers are indispensable
- Learner-centred pedagogies have generated numerous attempts to redefine the teacher's role: facilitator, counsellor, manager of learning resources
- Changing the terms we use to describe what teachers do in no way diminishes their responsibility for making things happen: the teacher's key role is to create and maintain a learning community; if teachers stop teaching, most learners will stop learning

Learner and teacher autonomy
- Learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy (Little 1995)
  - Teachers cannot be expected to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they do not themselves know what it is to be an autonomous learner
  - In all their pedagogical actions teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously
- "The decisive factor [in fostering the growth of learner autonomy] will always be the nature of the pedagogical dialogue" (Little 1995: 175)

Why dialogue is important
- Human nature is innately dialogic
  - Intersubjectivity (e.g., Trevarthen 1992, Bråten 1992, 1998)
  - Theory of mind (e.g., Astington, Harris and Olson 1988, Astington 1994)
- First language acquisition depends on social interaction
  - No talk, no language
  - The importance of scaffolding (Wood et al. 1976; Vygotsky 1978, 1986)
- All learning depends on social interaction
  - Self-instruction is a matter of internalizing social interactive processes

In an autonomous classroom
The teacher
- speaks to her learners in the target language, getting her meaning across by all possible means
- helps her learners to communicate by "scaffolding" their utterances and showing them how to "scaffold" one another's utterances (Wood et al. 1976)
- engages her learners in activities that allow them to "produce" language that is ahead of their present

level
- The teacher engages her learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class – *in the target language.* This begins as oral interaction using very simple techniques. Note that self-assessment is fundamental to learner autonomy/reflective learning: without it learners cannot plan or monitor their learning

The teacher's professional knowledge and skill
Teachers need
- an understanding of the dialogic processes that characterize language and shape learning
- the ability to model all the learning and communicative behaviours she wants to develop in her learners
- the capacity to plan not just lessons but trajectories of learning

But life is short …
- We may not be able to influence the pre-service education our teachers receive
- We may have only limited opportunities to provide in-service seminars
- Yet if we are serious about learner autonomy, we must be equally serious about its mirror image, teacher autonomy
- The European Language Portfolio provides a means of quickly developing an autonomy culture in contexts previously dominated by traditional pedagogy

The European Language Portfolio

Structure
- **Language Passport** – Summarizes the owner's linguistic identity and language learning and intercultural experience; records the owner's self-assessment
- **Language Biography** – Provides a reflective accompaniment to the ongoing processes of learning and using second languages and engaging with the cultures associated with them
- **Dossier** – Collects evidence of L2 proficiency and intercultural experience

Functions
- **Pedagogical function** – the ELP is designed to make the language learning process more transparent to the learner and foster the development of learner autonomy (cf. the Council of Europe's commitment to educational for democratic citizenship and lifelong learning)
- **Reporting function** – the ELP provides practical evidence of L2 proficiency and intercultural experience against the metric of the Common European Framework's common reference levels (cf. the Council of Europe's interest in developing a unit credit scheme in the 1970s)

Tools: the CEF's common reference levels
- The CEF (Council of Europe 2001) defines communicative proficiency at six levels, arranged in three broad bands (A1 and A2; B1 and B2; C1 and C2) in relation to five skills (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing) in the form of "can do" statements
- The common reference levels have already been adopted by

  − Association of Language Testers in Europe
  − Cambridge ESOL (UCLES), Goethe-Institut, etc.
  − European Union (Europass; plans for a PISA-like assessment of foreign language skills in member states)
  − Increasing numbers of ministries of education
  − HR departments of some large companies

Evidence that the ELP promotes learner autonomy
- The pilot projects, 1998-2000 (Schärer 2000)
- Informal experience reports (e.g. Little (ed.) 2003)
- Empirical evaluation projects focused on
  − university language learners (e.g. Little and Lazenby Simpson, forthcoming)
  − second-level language learners (e.g. Ushioda and Ridley 2002)
- Ph.D. research in progress focussed on
  − second-level language learners
  − adults with refugee status

How does the ELP work?
- All behavioural autonomy is the product of interactive/dialogic processes (Vygotsky 1978, 1986; see also Little 2001a, 2001b)
- The reflective processes that the ELP stimulates and supports are themselves dialogic (the learner in conversation with his/her present and past self)
- The three parts of the ELP correspond closely to a triadic architecture of personhood: *self – social identity – roles* (Riley 2003)

The ELP helps the teacher to …
- convert the communicative component of any curriculum into an inventory of tasks
- plan and negotiate a structure for learning in the short, medium and long term
- introduce and manage a portfolio approach to learning that does not have to set its own evaluation criteria
- reflect on the progress of individual learners and the whole class

Integrate Ireland Language and Training's ELP culture
- IILT's principal responsibilities: (i) to provide ESL courses for adult immigrants with refugee status; (ii) to support the teaching of ESL in primary and post-primary schools (curriculum, materials, assessment, in-service)
- Three versions of the ELP are the foundation for teaching and learning:
  − 11.2001: ELP for primary pupils learning the language of the host community
  − 12.2001: ELP for post-primary students learning the language of the host community
  − 37.2002: The Milestone ELP

ESL courses for adults
- Learners come to IILT with many different levels of English
- The ELP checklists are foundational in
  − exploring each individual's learning needs and goals
  − negotiating a learning agenda for each term and each week
  − evaluating learning outcomes at the end of each week
  − evaluating learning outcomes at the end of each term (this entails an interview between each learner and the teacher)

The ELP and teacher development

- IILT's teachers work closely together, developing and exchanging materials and activities
- They quickly grow used to discussing their courses, classes and learners in terms of (i) the CEF's common reference levels, and (ii) the reflective processes embodied in the structure of the ELP
- They review and analyse aspects of their performance in three in-service days each year
- They are involved in ongoing action research

How the ELP is mediated

- Learners already proficient in English: passport → biography → dossier
- Learners with a little English: biography → dossier → passport
- Learners with no English: dossier → biography → passport

Conclusion: so what about technology?

With the learner in mind

Do technology-based systems

- create space in which the learner can develop?
- take adequate account of the dialogic nature of language and learning?
- stimulate the reflective processes that are central to learner autonomy?
- support the planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning?

With the teacher in mind

- Do teacher-led technology-based systems
- support the teacher in planning, monitoring and evaluating learning?
- allow the teacher to model the communicative and learning behaviours that her learners are aiming at?
- Do teacher-less technology-based systems
- embody an autonomous teacher presence that mirrors the developing autonomy of the learner?

European Language Portfolio

- There are already several projects in progress to develop electronic versions of the ELP (either stand-alone or web-based)
- If such versions take account of the issues that are central to learner autonomy, they may well help us to solve some of the major problems that have bedevilled technology-based language learning systems

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