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Language Learner Autonomy: Some Fundamental Considerations Revisited

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The concept of learner autonomy is often applied to the process and content of language learning but not specifically to its intended outcome, the development of proficiency in a second or foreign language. Against this tendency, the present paper argues for an understanding of *language* learner autonomy in which the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are mutually supporting and fully integrated with each other. It further argues that only on the basis of such an understanding can learner autonomy move to the centre of language teaching theory and practice. The paper begins by considering the origins of the universally accepted definition of learner autonomy, 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. It then briefly reviews social-psychological and cognitive evidence in favour of promoting learner autonomy before discussing constructivist theories of pedagogy and their implications for a theory of language learner autonomy. From this it derives three fundamental principles – of learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use – and concludes by considering some of the ways in which these principles may be implemented in the language classroom.

doi: 10.2167/illt040.0

Keywords: autonomy, language and thought, learner involvement, learning journals, reflection, target language use

Introduction

To begin with, in the early 1980s, the concept of learner autonomy was mostly associated with adult education and self-access learning systems and seemed to be a matter of learners doing things on their own. By the end of that decade, however, partly under the impact of learner-centred theories of education, it was beginning to figure in discussion of language teaching generally, and through the 1990s more and more national curricula came to include learner autonomy (often dressed in borrowed clothes: 'independent learning', 'critical thinking') as a key goal. This brought an important shift of emphasis: learner autonomy now seemed to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves. These developments were accompanied, and to some extent driven, by a steady increase in the number of academic publications dealing with one or another aspect of learner autonomy. By the turn of the century textbooks designed for use in language teacher education had begun to include chapters or sections on learner autonomy (e.g. Harmer, 2001; Hedge, 2000).

None of this means, of course, that autonomy is now a defining characteristic of language learners around the world; on the contrary, the practical realisation of language learner autonomy remains elusive. Much academic discussion has been concerned to define what it is. For some the concept has been associated with Western liberal democracy, which makes it immediately suspect as a potential weapon of colonialism. Others have detached individual autonomy from learning, taking it to mean that learners (and their teachers) should have the freedom to do whatever they please, presumably including nothing. Empirical research has focussed on issues that certainly have to do with language learner autonomy – for example, the systematic evaluation of self-access learning systems, or explorations of learner attitudes, motivations, beliefs and narratives. But very little research has focused explicitly on the relation between learner autonomy, the processes of language learning and the development of proficiency in the target language (an important exception is the work of Dam and Legenhausen: Dam & Legenhausen, 1996, 1997; Legenhausen, 1999, 2001, 2003).

My purpose in this paper is to restate an understanding of *language* learner autonomy in which the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are not only mutually supporting but fully integrated with each other. This seems to me important, for it is only on the basis of such an understanding that we can implicate learner autonomy in a theory of language teaching: a set of general pedagogical principles that enable us to elaborate specific language teaching and learning procedures. Against a tendency that I observe in much of the literature on learner (and more recently teacher) autonomy, I follow Bruner (1966: 40) in believing that any theory of instruction is necessarily prescriptive in the sense that it sets forth the rules, or principles, that we must follow in order to achieve particular goals, and in doing so provides a yardstick for evaluating any particular way of teaching or learning. In other words, I believe that a theory of language learner autonomy should tell us what it is necessary to do in order to develop autonomous language learners and users and at the same time provide us with criteria by which to evaluate our efforts.

The Ability to Take Charge of One's Own Learning

If a single common thread runs through the increasingly diverse literature, it is that the essence of learner autonomy is *the ability to take charge of one's own learning*. This foundational definition was provided by Holec in *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, a report that was first published by the Council of Europe in 1979 (cited here as Holec, 1981). Holec wrote his report within the general context of the Council of Europe's work on the theory and practice of adult education. This was founded on the principle that adult education should 'develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives' (Holec, 1981: 1). According to this view adult education 'becomes 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 “product of his society”, one moves to the idea of man “producer of his society” (Janne, 1977: 15; cit. Holec, 1981: 3). Such a view had clear political implications for educational systems as it entailed a need to develop innovative structures to accommodate innovative approaches. It also implied that adult language learning should have an instrumental purpose and that adult language learning programmes should be capable of meeting the specific communicative needs of individual learners. The argument for a move from ‘directed teaching’ to ‘self-directed learning’ was motivated by a combination of political and practical principles, captured in Trim’s declaration that one of the Council of Europe’s ideals was to

make the process of language learning more democratic by providing the conceptual tools for the planning, construction and conduct of courses closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of the learner and enabling him so far as possible to steer and control his own progress. (Trim, 1978: 1)

For Holec the concept of learner autonomy has consequences not only for the way in which learning is organised but also for the kind of knowledge that is acquired. If the learner himself determines 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 that escapes him, to which he cannot but give way, but with a reality which he himself constructs and dominates’ (Holec, 1981: 21). Holec’s use of the verb ‘construct’ evidently refers to explicit rather than implicit processes, learner initiative and control rather than the unconscious and involuntary workings of cognition. But elsewhere in his report he notes the view of language learning that was beginning to emerge from empirical research towards 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 organized manner (teaching) or in non-organized form (“natural” untreated information)’ (p. 23). Learner autonomy thus appears to sit comfortably with constructivist theories of learning, though Holec does not explore the relation between them.

Holec’s failure to pursue the full psychological (constructivist) implications of learner autonomy may help to explain a contradiction in his position. Learner autonomy entails a shift from ‘directed teaching’ to ‘self-instructed learning’; but 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: 3). This leads Holec to posit 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 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’ (p. 23). For Holec, becoming an autonomous learner is clearly one thing and language learning another. And yet his claim that learner autonomy replaces ‘objective, universal knowledge’ with ‘subjective, individual knowledge’ (p. 21) implies a necessary relation between learning process, the content of learning and the use the learner can make of

what is learnt. As I explained in my introduction, exploring that relation and considering its consequences for language teaching and learning is the purpose of this paper.

Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness and Intersubjectivity

There is plenty of evidence from classrooms and self-access centres to suggest that learners are often reluctant to take charge of their own learning. They are accustomed to the passive role that school traditionally assigns to learners and distrustful of the idea that they should set learning targets, select learning materials and activities, and evaluate learning outcomes. Salmon (1998: 23) argues that this passive role coincides with the widespread idea that children are not yet ready for social responsibility, which she contrasts with domestic reality:

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

In other words, it is in our nature to be autonomous, to be proactive in exploring and responding to our environment and to persist in following the agendas we set for ourselves. Any parent knows how difficult it can be to distract a small child from a course of action that is socially undesirable or physically dangerous.

According to the American social psychologist Deci, autonomy is one of three basic needs that we must satisfy in order to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment. We are autonomous, he proposes, when we are 'fully willing to do what [we] are doing and [we] embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment' (Deci, 1996: 2). The other two basic needs are for competence and relatedness. We have a feeling of competence when we confront and successfully overcome 'optimal challenges' (p. 66); and we experience relatedness when we love and are loved by others (p. 88). It is sometimes assumed that the need for relatedness conflicts with the need for autonomy, but as Deci (1996: 89) points out, that is to confuse autonomy with independence:

Independence means to do for yourself, to not rely on others for personal nourishment and support. Autonomy, in contrast, means to act freely, with a sense of volition and choice. It is thus possible for a person to be independent and autonomous (i.e., to freely not rely on others), or to be independent and controlled (i.e., to feel forced not to rely on others).

From the perspective of Deci's theory of self-regulation, the freedom that autonomy entails is confirmed by our competence and constrained by our dependence on others. Applied to contexts of formal learning, the theory

predicts that learners who are autonomous (volitional in their learning) 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 paying off.

The notion of relatedness reminds us that learning usually depends on interaction with other people; indeed, Deci's three needs implicitly recognise our dual nature. On the one hand each of us incorporates cognitive and affective processes to which no one else can have direct access; on the other hand we are inescapably social beings who from the moment of our birth depend on other people in an infinite variety of ways. In any adequate definition of what it is to be human, both dimensions of our nature, individual-cognitive and social-interactive, are always and simultaneously present. But if our cognitive capacity is inborn, must our capacity to interact with others be acquired, or is it too part of our innate endowment? Over the past quarter of a century research on early child development has shown that we have an inborn capacity for 'intersubjectivity' that makes us interactive by nature. In particular, the work of Trevarthen and his associates (summarised in Trevarthen, 1998: 16) has shown that children are born with 'motives to find and use the motives of other persons in "conversational" negotiation of purposes, emotions, experiences and meaning'. In other words, children enter the world primed to take the initiative in establishing reciprocal relationships with their caregivers. One remark of Trevarthen's is especially worth reflecting on as it suggests an inevitable and necessary link between motivation, autonomy, development, reflectivity and communication:

This inborn intersubjective faculty of the infant must be seen as a direct effect of pure, unthinking motivation. Nevertheless, it has a rudimentary reflectivity and an autonomy that presage thoughtful message-making in the head, and communication of interest in a shared world. (Trevarthen, 1992: 105)

The concept of intersubjectivity helps to define the relation between autonomy and the interdependence of relatedness; it is a topic to which I shall return.

Constructivist Learning Theories

While the Council of Europe was promoting the democratisation of adult education and developing learner-centred tools for the design and delivery of adult language learning programmes, educational psychology was promoting the idea of learner-centredness in theory and practice. In the Council of Europe's work, learner-centredness arose from the notion that each adult language learner has a unique set of communicative needs. In educational psychology, on the other hand, learner-centredness derived overwhelmingly from constructivist epistemologies.

There are many varieties of constructivism, but all make the same basic claim: that we construct our knowledge by bringing what we already know into interaction with the new information, ideas and experiences we encounter. Thus, according to constructivist epistemologies, knowledge is not a set of universal 'truths' but a set of 'working hypotheses' (Airasian &

Walsh, 1997: 445) that are always subject to refinement, change, rejection and replacement. Kelly (1991: I, 51) put it as follows in his *Psychology of Personal Constructs*:

The constructions one places upon events are working hypotheses, which are about to be put to the test of experience. As one's anticipations or hypotheses are successively revised in the light of the unfolding sequence of events, the construction system undergoes a progressive evolution. The person reconstrues. This is experience.

Traditionally the knowledge embodied in curricula has been thought of as a gradually expanding set of objective truths that it is the function of schools (and for that matter colleges and universities) to transmit to their pupils (or students). But the constructivist view casts doubt on the efficacy of transmission models of teaching and learning, preferring exploration and interpretation to recitation. This is not to deny the existence of knowledge independent of individual knowers, or the possibility of basing curricula on such 'external' knowledge; but it is to insist that effective learning is more than a matter of memorising what one is told.

The version of this argument contained in Barnes's classic book *From Communication to Curriculum* rests in part on the distinction he makes between 'school knowledge' and 'action knowledge'. This is what he has to say about these two kinds of knowledge:

School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes however we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated into that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say that it has become 'action knowledge'. (Barnes, 1976: 81)

These words neatly capture one of the recurrent problems faced by educational systems: the production of learning that remains cut off from the rest of learners' lives. According to Barnes, pedagogical measures designed to counteract this effect must engage learners in exploratory, interpretative processes that allow them to bring their action knowledge to bear on the school knowledge they are presented with. This has an immediate and inevitable impact on classroom discourse, as it allows learners the freedom to take a number of discourse initiatives that traditional pedagogies often deny them – asking exploratory questions, making suggestions, challenging others' statements, evaluating learning plans, tasks and outcomes. And new forms of classroom discourse make it possible, at least in principle, to establish continuity between the roles that learners play inside and outside the classroom; for they seek to stimulate learners' 'active presence', harness their 'wilful agency', accommodate their 'demands and protests', engage them in 'negotiation' and integrate their 'personal agendas' into the evolving learning agenda of the classroom (cf. Salmon's description of family life above).

According to this view, formal learning is maximally effective when it is 'participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them' (Bruner, 1996: 84). This does not mean, however, that anything goes. The purpose of education remains the same as ever: to give learners access to the multifaceted culture into which they have been born. Learners cannot construct their knowledge out of nothing, neither can they know by instinct how to conduct focused and purposeful learning conversations that shape themselves to the ways of thinking characteristic of the subject in question. Teachers remain indispensable, both as pedagogues and as discipline experts.

Classroom procedures that are participatory, proactive, communal and collaborative are also of necessity reflective: every question asked and every judgement made entails an act of self-conscious distancing from the object, and sometimes also the process, of learning. This is what Bruner means when he writes of the language of education:

It must express stance and must invite counter-stance and in the process leave place for reflection, for metacognition. It is this that permits one to reach higher ground, this process of objectifying in language or image what one has thought and then turning around on it and reconsidering it. (Bruner, 1986: 129)

For Bruner (1986: 132) a capacity for 'reflective intervention' is a defining characteristic of what I would describe as an autonomous learner:

If he fails to develop any sense of what I shall call reflective intervention in the knowledge he encounters, the young person will be operating continually from the outside in – knowledge will control and guide him. If he succeeds in developing such a sense, he will control and select knowledge as needed. If he develops a sense of self that is premised on his ability to penetrate knowledge for his own uses, and if he can share and negotiate the result of his penetrations, then he becomes a member of the culture-creating community.

The argument from constructivism may be summarised as follows. Each of us constructs his or her own knowledge through the (unconscious, implicit) interaction between what we already know and the new ideas, information and experiences we encounter. In contexts of formal learning we should try to assist the involuntary, unconscious construction of knowledge by adopting pedagogical procedures that are exploratory, interpretative and participatory. Such procedures allow learners to assume discourse roles that traditional pedagogies deny them. Through the adoption of such roles learners begin to take control of their own learning; at the same time they are necessarily drawn into reflection on the content and processes of their learning. What Bruner calls 'reflective intervention' in knowledge confirms the learner's status as an autonomous member of the learning community.

How exactly does language come into the picture? Another way of summarising the argument is to say that knowledge is constructed through the learner's involvement in linguistically mediated interactions, encoded in language, and reproduced through one or another kind of communicative

activity (speaking or writing). Besides being the tool with which we construct knowledge, however, language is also the tool we use for the metacognitive/metalinguistic processes of 'reflective intervention'. The question then arises: what are we to make of this argument when we are teachers of a second or foreign language?

Theories of Language Learning

According to Ellis (2003: 63), constructivist theories of language acquisition

hold that simple learning mechanisms operating in and across human systems for perception, motor action, and cognition while exposed to language data in a communicatively rich human social environment navigated by an organism eager to exploit the functionality of language are sufficient to drive the emergence of complex language representations.

This summary contains one assumption and two claims. The assumption is that language acquisition is a matter of developing complex language representations in the brain. The first claim is that this does not require a special language acquisition device but uses the same mechanisms as other kinds of learning; and the second claim is that those mechanisms are activated when language is used for purposes of communication (where communication comprises reception, production, interaction and mediation in speech and writing). Other theories of language acquisition assume the existence of an innate language faculty (e.g. White, 2003), but they too emphasise the need for input, interaction and output (e.g. Gass, 2003). In other words, constructivist and innatist theories alike assign language use a key role in language learning.

Children do not first learn their mother tongue and then set about using what they have learnt to communicate with their parents and siblings. Rather, they gradually learn the language as a result of their efforts to communicate; and their efforts to communicate are a manifestation of that 'intersubjectivity' I referred to earlier. The same is true of a migrant worker 'picking up' the language of his workmates as a result of his daily interaction with them. Logic tells us that it should also be true of the way in which we organise language learning in formal educational contexts, yet teachers and learners persist in believing that it is possible to develop communicative proficiency in a second or foreign language by doing almost anything but use the language. All too often in language classrooms 'language use' is interpreted to mean the recitation of scripted dialogues; and when it does involve spontaneous talk, communication is all too often either one-way, from teacher to learners, or requires only brief and formulaic learner contributions. But while it is clear that learners need to interact with input they can understand, it is also clear that their own efforts to communicate increasingly complex messages in speech and writing play an essential role. As Swain (2000: 99) has observed, output requires deeper language processing and greater mental effort than input: 'Output may stimulate learners to move from

the semantic, open-ended, strategic processing prevalent in comprehension to the complete grammatical processing needed for accurate production’.

Child language development and other forms of naturalistic language acquisition are driven by dialogue in which the learner is supported by more expert speakers. Support – or scaffolding (Wood *et al.*, 1976) – can take many forms. When a baby is not yet capable of speech, parents and siblings typically ‘translate’ both sides of their reciprocal interactions into speech: their own initiatives and the child’s responses, but also what they take to be the child’s initiatives and their responses (another instance of intersubjectivity). In due course conversations are built around the child’s one-word utterances, with the more expert speakers providing elaboration and interpretation. And so it goes on. Gradually the language generated by these reciprocal exchanges becomes part of the child’s own mental resources.

This dialogic dynamic is characteristic not only of naturalistic language acquisition but also (as we have seen) of the exploratory, interpretative techniques that characterise constructivist pedagogy. Vygotsky’s notion of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) captures essential features of both situations. He defined the ZPD as

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978: 86)

This definition assumes that learning is the result of doing, acknowledges the role of expertise in guiding the learning process and identifies autonomy in the sense of being able to do things for oneself (‘independent problem solving’) as the goal of learning. The implication is that each time a particular learning goal is achieved, what has been learnt provides the platform from which to launch into the next ZPD. When we apply this metaphor not to language acquisition but to learning in general, language still plays a central role, for it is the tool by which the learning process is shaped and knowledge and skill are mediated. This is a matter of spoken communication – describing and analysing the task in hand, evaluating the merits of different approaches, giving instructions, proposing alternatives, and so on; but it is also a matter of building internal representations of the task and its performance that the learner can draw on in future acts of independent task performance. This brings us to Vygotsky’s view of the relationship between language and thought, or more accurately, speaking and thinking.

According to sociocultural theory, higher psychological functions – voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts – are internalised from social interaction: ‘An operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed and begins to occur internally’ (Vygotsky, 1978: 56–57). In this way social speech (speaking with others) is internalised first as egocentric speech (speaking aloud, but to and for oneself: ‘a process internal in nature but external in manifestation’; Vygotsky, 1987: 258) and then as inner speech (speaking internally, to and for oneself: ‘speech that is psychologically inner and that functions in a manner analogous to external egocentric speech’; p. 71). The transformations involved in this development

are not straightforward; neither is the relation between speaking and thinking. Lantolf (2000: 7) provides a useful summary:

Sociocultural theory argues that while separate, thinking and speaking are tightly interrelated in a dialectic unity in which publicly derived speech completes privately initiated thought. Thus, thought cannot be explained without taking account of how it is made manifest through linguistic means, and linguistic activities, in turn, cannot be understood fully without 'seeing them as manifestations of thought'. (Bakhurst, 1991: 60)

The dialectic unity of speaking and thinking has not been a central concern of research into second language acquisition, though it is clear that the capacity for inner speech must be an integral part of any worthwhile second or foreign language proficiency. We use inner speech in a multitude of ways: to support all forms of reading and extensive listening, to plan the apology we have to make for forgetting a friend's birthday, to prepare ourselves for a difficult interview by trying to anticipate the questions we shall be asked and working out what our answers should be, and so on. How do we develop this capacity for inner speech in the language classroom? By requiring learners not only to take the initiative in determining learning goals and selecting learning materials and activities, but to do this in the target language, and to use the target language also for regular 'reflective intervention' in what they have learnt and how they have learnt it. When they use the target language as the medium of task performance but also of metacognition and metalinguistic reflection, learners' developing proficiency is an integral part of the autonomy that arises from successful task performance. That, as it seems to me, is the essential characteristic of *language learner autonomy*.

Pedagogical Implications

These considerations led me several years ago to propose that success in second and foreign language teaching is governed by three interacting principles: learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use (Little, 1999, 2001). The principle of learner involvement requires that the teacher draws her learners into their own learning process, making them share responsibility for setting the learning agenda, selecting learning activities and materials, managing classroom interaction and evaluating learning outcomes. Learner involvement is not, of course, the result of a single pedagogical act but a process that requires constant attention from the beginning to the end of the course of learning. Few learners will arrive at their first class ready to take complete charge of their own learning; for most, self-management in learning will be something they have to learn, to begin with by taking very small steps. The teacher's task is to identify those areas in which she can require her learners to take decisions from the first day; but she must also be quick to relinquish control as soon as the learners are ready to take over in other areas. Dam (1995) has provided us with a paradigmatic account of the techniques and processes involved. It is important to recognise that the teacher has a

responsibility to intervene when her learners' choices are leading them into a blind alley, and especially when they are failing to set themselves 'optimal challenges'. And she must provide suggestions and procedures that lie beyond their experience, cultivating a classroom dynamic that constantly lifts them to new levels of effort and achievement.

In some contexts it is possible for the teacher to negotiate a curriculum exclusively on the basis of her learners' perceived needs, as in the English language classes that Integrate Ireland Language and Training (www.iilt.ie) provides for adult immigrants with refugee status. This is how one teacher went about constructing a 17-week curriculum for a class of learners with little or no English. She decided that she needed 13 topics, so she made up a set of 20 pictures, each of which illustrated an aspect of life in Ireland: the corner shop, the doctor's surgery, a parent-teacher meeting at school, going to the bank, and so on. She then gave each of her 15 learners three coloured stickers and invited them to put one sticker on each of the topics that they most wanted to deal with. The 13 pictures with the most stickers determined the main themes for the term. The other pictures/topics were not ignored, however; the teacher left them on the classroom wall so that they too could be referred to whenever possible as the term unfolded.

Teaching the language of the host community to adult immigrants is obviously a special case. The great majority of language teachers, certainly in schools, are obliged to shape their courses according to official curriculum guidelines, sometimes elaborated in great detail. But this in no way undermines the principle of learner involvement, for two reasons. First, each teacher will necessarily have her own understanding of the curriculum and her own approach to its delivery. Writing from the perspective of Kelly's personal construct psychology (see above, p. 6), Salmon (1988: 37) argues that 'you are yourself, in some sense, what you teach':

One teacher's Spanish is not the Spanish of her colleague; though the syllabus may be the same, the lessons are not. What gives importance, value, vitality to one person's material is hers alone; and it is this – or its absence – which is the real substance of her teaching.

Secondly, whereas the curriculum itself may not be negotiable, how precisely its goals are pursued certainly is. In my adult immigrant example the teacher must help her learners to answer the question: what English is it most urgent for us to learn in order to cope with life in Ireland? In a secondary classroom the question is rather: given the goals of the French curriculum, how are we going to achieve them?

The principle of learner reflection is already implied by the principle of learner involvement. It is after all impossible to set a learning target, select learning activities and materials, or evaluate learning outcomes without thinking about what you are doing. But the principle of learner reflection also requires us to embrace 'reflective intervention' as a key feature of the teaching-learning process. That is, we must supplement the incidental reflection that planning, monitoring and evaluating learning entail by an explicitly detached reflection on the process and content of learning. This too depends on skills that learners have to acquire gradually, from very modest

beginnings. The very word 'reflection' is potentially misleading here, because it can easily conjure up an image of classrooms full of silent learners with furrowed brows, each struggling to understand the mystery of his or her cognitive and metacognitive processes. In fact, of course, the kind of reflection we are concerned with here begins in dialogue between teacher and learners or within learner groups as an enactment of Bruner's 'language of education' (see above); and following Vygotsky's principle of internalisation, what begins as social speech is gradually transformed into the capacity for inner speech (or discursive thinking) in the target language.

The principle of target language use entails quite simply that the target language is the medium through which all classroom activities are conducted, organisational and reflective as well as communicative. It is, of course, on this principle that the fullest possible integration of learner autonomy with target language proficiency depends. Teachers often object that it is impossible for learners to use the target language to organise and (especially) reflect on their learning. But this is clearly not the case, as is shown by the experience of, for example, Dam (1995), Thomsen (2000, 2003), Thomsen and Gabrielsen (1991) and Integrate Ireland Language and Training (Little, forthcoming). In the early stages much depends on the teacher's capacity to scaffold her interactions with the class, groups of learners and individuals; but as Thomsen (2003) has shown, when learners have achieved a level of proficiency that enables them to conduct intensive group work in the target language, they are also capable of applying metalinguistic concepts to the analysis of the target language and their own output.

The key to successful implementation of the principle of target language use lies in the effective use of group work and the appropriate use of writing. Group work is essential because it is only by working in small groups that learners can engage in intensive interactive use of the target language – following Vygotskian principles, we predict that language produced interactively gradually becomes part of the individual learner's internalised mental resources (Swain, 2000; Thomsen, 2003). Groups mostly choose activities that end with the production of some kind of written output: a story, a report of some kind, the script of a short play, a collection of poems or songs. But from time to time the teacher may also encourage them to work on projects that bring the forms of the target language into focus, for example, the ambitious vocabulary learning project described by Thomsen (2003). Thus some of the activities learners choose are similar to those pursued in task-based learning (Skehan, 1998, 2003), except that the learners themselves devise the tasks; while other activities recall form-focused instruction (Doughty & Williams 1998), except that the learners themselves decide which forms to focus on.

Some language teaching traditions, notably the audiolingual and audiovisual methods, have insisted that listening and speaking should be developed before reading and writing. But this is to deny learners one of the most useful supports for learning of any kind: writing things down. It also excludes the use of writing to construct longer texts 'offline' when learners' oral proficiency is such that they find it difficult to produce complex oral utterances. In autonomous classrooms writing has been used in three ways: to make posters that summarise learning plans or list useful vocabulary, idioms or grammatical

structures; to maintain journals or logbooks in which learners capture the process and progress of their learning; and to produce various kinds of written text as the output of group projects. In each of these modes what is written down can be used to support speaking; at the same time speaking helps to generate what is written down. Also, the use of writing from the beginning facilitates focus on linguistic form: as Olson has observed, there is an important sense in which literacy *is* metalinguistic activity (Olson, 1991).

In formal learning generally learner journals have been promoted as vehicles for reflection and self-evaluation (e.g. Kent, 1997; Moon, 1999). But when language learners keep journals in their target language, using them to capture *all* their learning, journals move to the very centre of the learning process. Cumulatively the journal becomes the story of the individual's language learning, illustrating the gradual expansion of identity that comes with developing proficiency in a second or foreign language. It is worth mentioning here the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (ELP; Little, 2002) as a particular kind of learner journal that is divided into three parts: a language passport, a language biography and a dossier. The ELP provides checklists of 'I can' statements for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing, scaled according to the common proficiency levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001; see also Little, 2006). The checklists are used to select learning goals, monitor progress and evaluate outcomes. This formalisation of the role played by self-assessment in the autonomous language classroom has great potential for future development: as more and more assessment systems align themselves with the proficiency levels defined in the CEFR, the ELP offers us the chance to develop assessment cultures that accommodate self-assessment and value learner autonomy (Little, 2005).

Conclusion

The central argument of this paper may be summarised as follows. Learner autonomy is the product of an interactive process in which the teacher gradually enlarges the scope of her learners' autonomy by gradually allowing them more control of the process and content of their learning. In classrooms as well as in naturalistic contexts communicative proficiency in a second or foreign language is also the product of an interactive process. Thus when *language* learner autonomy is an educational goal, we must devise an interactive dynamic that *simultaneously* develops communicative proficiency and learner autonomy: autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin.

I began the theoretical part of my argument with Holec's universally accepted definition of learner autonomy, then summarised motivational and cognitive arguments in favour of learner autonomy. After that I described constructivist approaches to pedagogy, went on to consider what they imply when the object of learning is a second or foreign language, and ended by spelling out some of the pedagogical implications of my position. The argument can also be conducted in reverse order, starting with the discourse

dynamic required to promote language learning, which requires us to grant learners freedoms that can be sustained only if they take charge of their own learning. This fact confirms, as it seems to me, that language learner autonomy is not an optional extra, sometimes required by the way in which learning is organised, but belongs at the very centre of language teaching theory and practice. In this regard it is important to insist that my argument is not merely speculative. On the contrary, it is an attempt at a principled exploration of pedagogical realities that have existed for the past quarter of a century. The things that I propose teachers should do in their classrooms have been tried and tested in a number of countries, especially in northern Europe (e.g. Aase *et al.*, 2000; Dam, 1995, 2000; Little, forthcoming; Thomsen 2000, 2003; Thomsen & Gabrielsen, 1991).

Finally, it is necessary to draw attention to the implications of my argument for teacher development. In a paper published more than 10 years ago I argued that the development of learner autonomy depends on the development of teacher autonomy (Little, 1995). By this I meant two things: first, that it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner; and secondly, that in determining the initiatives they take in the classroom, teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously, applying to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning. It now seems to me that there is a third requirement: teachers must learn how to produce and manage the many varieties of target language discourse required by the autonomous classroom. This is a major challenge, but until teacher educators rise to it, language learner autonomy as I have defined it in this paper will remain a minority achievement.

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