

CHAPTER THREE

FROM AUTONOMY TO AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING

HAYO REINDERS

Abstract

Learner autonomy is an educational concept that attracts a lot of attention worldwide. A recent count showed 17 conferences in less than two years dealing with autonomy or related topics. In the years since Henri Holec first proposed a formal definition of autonomy as a language educational concept (1981) many other definitions have been put forward but there remains a great deal of discussion around these. In this article I argue that rather than defining autonomy (which is extremely challenging), it may be both easier and more meaningful from a pedagogical point of view to attempt a definition of the behaviour that characterises autonomy, i.e. autonomous learning. This article first traces the historical roots of autonomy before proposing a model of autonomous learning that will be a first step to help practitioners to better understand the scope and meaning of the term, and will also help to better implement and assess autonomy in their learners.

Keywords: learner autonomy, independence, self-direction, educational psychology

The Emergence of Learner Autonomy as an Educational Concept

In order to understand the meaning of the term *learner autonomy*, it is important to understand its background and its emergence as a pedagogical concept. This development has taken place over a period of at least 40 years, and has been subject to changes in education, science, and also broader political and societal developments. Below I will describe these developments individually, bearing in mind that together these developments did not take place linearly.

Autonomy and Political Developments in Education

Autonomy as a political concept originated perhaps as early as with Aristotle and has, mainly through Kant, played an important role in both the philosophical and practical expression of political developments in the 20th century. After WW II a great number of minority rights movements (feminist, ethnic, etc.) sprang up that used the concept to express their ideas about the right to freedom of choice. They regarded education as an empowering tool that would instill in people an awareness of these issues. As Jane (1977, as cited by Holec 1981) says:

Adult education should become 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 as 'producer of his society'. (p.3)

In this view it is the individual who is responsible and active in shaping his or her own life and therefore that of others. Education has to prepare learners for this role, which involves teaching them the skills necessary to take control over the processes and content of learning. In the words of Collins and Hammond (1991): "it begins with the assumption that the ultimate purpose of education is the betterment of society, and that critical awareness and social action to promote emancipation are desirable results of any educational intervention" (p.13). A later development of this thinking is the Language Awareness Movement (Hawkins 1981, 1984; James & Garrett, 1991) and related approaches (see also Van Lier, 1995). These recognised the political influence of ideas that learners hold about learning, their own and others peoples' language, its use and its consequences. Their aim is to increase peoples' awareness of the political aspect of language. These developments have had a considerable influence on the concept of learner autonomy.

Autonomy and the Effects of Societal Changes on Education

After WW II the demand for foreign and second languages increased sharply (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). International trade, easier communication, cheaper transport, a range of international political developments (such as the founding of the UN), and migratory movements all led to an increase in the teaching of foreign and second languages. These developments also influenced the content of what was taught, as communicative skills became

more important than ever before. Broady and Kenning (1996) link this to a demand for different language skills: “Using language effectively for communication involves negotiation of meaning, rather than mere decoding of linguistic tokens, thus requiring the ability to cope confidently with unpredictable information” (p.10).

Global changes in the availability of information (cheaper print materials, computer databases, the internet) also heavily influenced what was expected of people in terms of dealing with large amounts of (new) information, relating it to other information and interpreting it (Lamb & Reinders, 2005; Pemberton, 1996). People now needed skills that allow them to adapt to quickly changing circumstances and develop new skills, for there was no longer a fixed body of knowledge that could be transmitted to learners. The increase in the number of university students has resulted in rising costs and some have argued for a long time that it is no longer possible to teach all students all they need to know (Trim, 1976). Crabbe (1993, cites Van Ek, 1975) :

The economic argument is that society does not have the resources to provide the level of personal instruction needed by all its members in every area of learning. Therefore individuals must be able to provide for their own learning needs [...] if they are to acquire the knowledge and skill they want. (p. 443)

Changes in the ways societies work, learn and live, have thus led to the need for life-long learning skills, or the ability to direct one's own learning and to respond to changes in one's situation by choosing and managing future learning in the most appropriate way. Education today must provide the skills necessary for this process. On an international level this has been recognised by the European Council which has stimulated research in this area (see also Holec & Huttunen, 1997).

Autonomy and Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics views language as inseparable from its sociocultural context. It considers language as a tool for communication that is used in a social context. Individuals with personal needs and intentions learn to express themselves in relation to the groups they are part of. They use the language to share, maintain, and influence a certain social reality. In this view it is not enough to learn a language as the sum of its linguistic features, but one also needs to know how to use the language appropriately. For teaching practice this means allowing social reality to be a part of the learning experience. Because social reality changes constantly and because

learners influence it as well as are influenced by it, teachers cannot teach everything about a language. Learners influence the social context and therefore the language and its use. Learners therefore become more important members of a classroom community. The greater understanding of the social aspects of language and language learning has led to an increased understanding of the role of the individual in the learning process and the importance of valuing and supporting that role. In this way, developments in sociolinguistics have contributed indirectly to the development of the concept of learner autonomy.

Autonomy and Psychology

In the 1950s and 60s, there was a broad development in the field of psychology away from behaviourism, with its view of learning as a change in behavior, towards an increased focus on the individual. Constructivism played an important role at this time. It sees knowledge as a reorganisation and restructuring of experience; something that cannot be directly taught, because it is a unique process for every individual (see also Candy, 1991). The same applies to language learning where learners thus actively construct their own target language through unique experiences. In psychology, humanism as “the study of personality focussing on the individual’s subjective experience—his or her personal view of the world” (Atkinson, 1993, p. 544) became increasingly influential. It gave a central place to the unique individual. Experiences and insights were considered more important than behavior alone: “It is not the events and texts themselves that are ingrained in his memory but the object of his attentions. How he has apprehended the matter and what he has done with it” (Kelly, 1955, p.35).

Psychologists like Kelly (1955), Bruner (1966), and Maslow (1968) all emphasized the role of the individual and his or her specific needs and these ideas had a strong influence also on education. For the development of learner autonomy especially the work of Carl Rogers has been influential. He too regarded the tendency of human beings to fulfil or actualise all of their capacities as the main motivation for personal growth. It is the learner who learns and not the teacher who teaches. The teacher facilitates learning in learners, and the quality of this interaction is largely based on the relationship between them, where trust and empathy make learning experiences more pervasive and therefore make a difference to the behaviour of the learner. For the same reason, it is ultimately the learner who is the only person able to evaluate progress (Rogers, 1969).

The work of Stevick (1980) relates to this in that it sees as a critical task for the teacher the enhancement of this process of self-fulfillment and therefore the facilitation of learning. A genuine interest in the student, his or her work and personal experience are a prerequisite for success. Stevick further writes about the need to strike a balance between control and initiative. The teacher acts as an expert on the subject matter, for example making comparisons with the learner's linguistic production and that of a native speaker, or that of a learner and his previous production. The amount of control or initiative is flexible.

Self-fulfillment and personal growth are strongly influenced by affective factors such as motivation and courage. Research in this field has influenced language teaching methodologies and several teaching methods have arisen from it, such as Suggestopedia (Lozanov, 1978) and the Silent Way (Gattegno, 1963). More importantly perhaps, these insights have had a considerable influence on all teaching methodologies by emphasizing the needs of the individual and the focus on personal development rather than the transmission of some abstract body of knowledge.

The connection with a learner's personal development determines the meaningfulness of new knowledge. If learning is not perceived by a learner to be meaningful, it is less likely to be incorporated into his or her internal schemes. It might be learned and remembered, but not become part of a learner's internal representation of the world. In this context, Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (1984) and Rivers (1983) talk about the distinction between *school knowledge* and *action knowledge*, where the latter becomes more internalised and can therefore also be applied outside the school (or any other environment). This type of learning is related to autonomous learning, since no teacher can make the link to these internal schemes directly. Ultimately, this is perhaps where real autonomy lies. Learners have to work actively with these internal schemes themselves. They need to compare new information with existing knowledge, look for similarities, organise new knowledge logically etc. We touch here upon a distinction made between active and proactive learners (Knowles, 1975). In short, active learners take responsibility for this process whereas proactive learners wait for external stimuli and help. In relation to learner autonomy, Dickinson (1995) says that:

There is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners) They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. (p. 14)

These findings have influenced several methodologies. The project-syllabus (Legutke & Thomas, 1991) tries to involve learners more actively in the learning process. This is also the underlying idea of the process syllabus (Breen, 1987). The learner-centred approach, (more influenced by humanistic psychology than cognitive psychology) gives learners a central place in education. Nunan (1995) defines the learner-centred curriculum as one where “key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed will be made with reference to the learner” (p. 134, see also Nunan, 1988).

This focus on the learners and their unique ways of learning was also influenced by research into learning styles (Willing, 1988) and learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). It was found that different learners approached learning tasks in different ways. This meant that classroom instruction had to take into account these differences (and that therefore they had to be understood properly in the first place), in order to make the learning experience maximally useful to the largest number of students possible. This thinking directly influenced the (further) development of learner-centred approaches in language education. A different implication was that it might be possible to identify ways in which successful learners differ from less successful learners. Identifying the characteristics of the ‘good language learner’ (Naiman, et al, 1978; Rubin 1975) became an important impetus for research. One suggestion of this research was that good learners are more involved in the learning process; they participate actively (Wesche, 1979), they are self-motivators (Ushioda, 1996), they are good self-assessors (Hagen, Barclay & Newman, 1982), good monitors (Weinstein & Rogers, 1985) and they generally know more about themselves and about their learning than less successful learners (Wenden, 1991). These ideas directly influenced the development of the concept of learner autonomy. They are closely related to the area of metacognition, which is the focus of the next section.

Autonomy and Metacognition

In the section above I have already touched upon the subject of metacognition several times. Metacognition is our knowledge of cognitive processes. Flavell (1970) was the first to coin the term and referred to it as our awareness of the learning process. According to Hacker, Dunlosky and Graesser (1998), metacognitive awareness consists of three parts: thinking of what one knows (metacognitive knowledge), thinking of what one is currently doing (metacognitive skill) and thinking of what one’s current cognitive or affective state is (metacognitive experience). What is important

is that all this knowledge, the beliefs and perceptions are related to learner autonomy. These three elements are needed to make informed decisions about one's learning. If it is the aim of education to let learners take charge of their own learning (for whichever of the reasons mentioned in the preceding paragraphs), then they need to be able to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning. And in order to do so, they need to be metacognitively aware. In the words of O'Malley and Chamot (1985): "Students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction and ability to review their progress, accomplishments and future learning directions" (p.24).

The relationship between metacognitive awareness and learning gains has yet to be explored. One of the few examples is a study conducted by Jones et al. (1987, cited in Sinclair 1999) who found that metacognitive awareness was related to success in language learning in that effective learners were aware of the processes underlying their own learning processes and attempted to use appropriate strategies to manage their own learning. However, the relationship is as yet unclear and depends on many factors. Kluwe (1982) summarises:

Whether people can monitor and regulate their thinking, how and when they monitor and regulate, and whether greater chances for success are realised through monitoring and regulating depends on the task, the demands posed by the task, people's knowledge of the task, and the kinds of cognitive strategies they can bring to bear on the task. However, equally important is how people assess themselves as self-regulatory organisms, as 'agents of their own thinking'. (p.222)

However, it is clear that metacognitive awareness is an important element in learning and crucial to the development of learner autonomy (Wilkins 1996; Wenden, 1999). In the words of Little (1997) "Clearly, the development of explicit metalinguistic awareness is fundamental to our capacity for autonomy as language users" (p. 37).

Autonomy and Consciousness

Intrinsically related to the previous discussion about the role of metacognition is the debate about the role of consciousness in language learning. It is also related to learner autonomy, as autonomous learning requires metacognitive awareness and awareness is a form of consciousness. Schmidt (1995) identifies four different types of consciousness:

- consciousness as intention: is learning on purpose, intentional versus incidental

- consciousness as attention: noticing and focusing
- consciousness as awareness: having knowledge of learning
- consciousness as control : automatised performance of tasks

Van Lier (1996) gives a useful analogy to clarify the differences between these different types of consciousness; the unconscious person is in a coma, the unaware goes through life in a daze, and the inattentive person will sooner or later get run over by a car. Schmidt (1995) suggests that people may not be aware of learning, but do need to notice things in order to learn them. He summarises:

Attention is required for all learning...I have also argued that detection (in the information processing sense), subjective awareness at the level of noticing, and learning all coincide. Learning at the higher level of understanding also seems crucial in most cases, and where generalisation without awareness does seem to take place this is accomplished through simple associative learning applied to a rich memory base, rather than the unconscious induction of abstract rules. (p.45)

He concludes by giving learners advice on how to learn, telling them to pay attention to input, to compare between native speakers' language and their own and build hypotheses on this. He finishes by saying that "nothing comes for free", which is what is relevant to our discussion of learner autonomy. Research on the "good language learner" has found that learners who are more active participants in the learning process generally outperform those who are less active. Research on strategy use has found that better learners use more strategies and that they use them in a more flexible way. Linking this to the study of consciousness in learning, it seems that a deliberate or at least an attentive conscious effort has to be made for learners to learn the most. This is probably also where motivation plays a role. Motivation makes us more active, makes us want things and do our best to achieve them. Paying attention, comparing, building hypotheses, are all characteristics of the autonomous language learner. The more autonomous the language learners are, the more consciously involved in the learning process they generally become.

Defining Autonomous Learning

All the disciplines discussed above have influenced thinking about language teaching and learning and especially about the role of the language learner in the learning process. The process syllabus (Breen, 1984), the learner-centred approach (Nunan, 1988) and many other

approaches and methodologies are a result of this, but more importantly the individual learner now occupies a more central place in the language classroom. Learners are generally encouraged to be more responsible for their own learning both inside and out of the classroom; therefore, there is an increased focus on developing the skills necessary for this. The interest in the development of learner autonomy was not set in a theoretical framework until the late 1970's, when all these streams of thought found a synthesis in the ideas put forward by Holec (1981). He defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). This ability includes "a potential capacity to act in a given situation—in our case learning—and not the actual behaviour of an individual in that situation" (p.3). The actual behaviour is autodidaxy. So for Holec learner autonomy is an ability, not an action. Some authors concur. For instance, Little (1991) defines it as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p.4) [the word *capacity* may imply variability in its use]. For Little there is a certain amount of awareness (critical reflection) involved whereas for Nunan (1995) the ability is crucial. He believes that "learners who have reached a point where they are able to define their own goals and create their own learning opportunities have, by definition, become autonomous" (p.145). For Huttunen (1986) the act of a certain type of learning is important: "A learner is fully autonomous when he is working individually or in a group, taking responsibility for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of his studies" (p.95).

If we look at the discussed definitions, we find that they focus on autonomy as either an ability or as a particular kind of learning act. These definitions seem to be incomplete. To have an ability to do something but not do it would hardly be useful. For example, a student can have the ability to take charge of his or her learning but still decide to be highly teacher-dependent and take no initiative whatsoever. On the other hand, if autonomy is defined as a student taking responsibility without having the ability to do so, then for example any blind act of randomly choosing materials from a library shelf could be seen as a display of autonomy, which of course it is not.

What seems to be missing in these definitions is an emphasis on the role of consciousness in the learning process. Poor language learners also use learning strategies, but often not the most efficient ones, or they don't use them in an efficient manner. They may also make choices about what to learn when forced to do so, but these choices are not likely to be the best ones. They are not conscious of some aspects of their way of learning, or their current knowledge, or of the existence of alternative learning

strategies. Lai (2001) talks about this when she makes the distinction between learners' conceptual understanding (metacognitive awareness) of various aspects of self-directed language learning, and their actual ability (methodological techniques) in planning for this kind of learning. The conceptual understanding is important. According to Brookfield (1986):

It may be possible to be a superb technician of self-directed learning in terms of one's command of goal setting, instructional design or evaluative procedures, and yet to exercise no critical questioning of the validity or worth of one's intellectual pursuit as compared with competing, alternative possibilities. (p.29)

Chené (1983) believes that "to be resourceful and to be independent do not equal the achievement of autonomy" (as cited in Brookfield, 1986, p.57). Candy (1991) refers to this as the distinction between situational and epistemological autonomy. Clearly, there is more to autonomous language learning than just a certain capability.

It could be said that the perfect language learner (who, of course, does not exist), is at the very least completely conscious of his or her learning, and all aspects related to the learning process. The perfect learner then has the potential to use all the internal and external resources available. Affective and social filters will influence actual performance, but all the available potential skills are employed to the fullest. The perfect language learner, then, would not be the one who is the fastest learner, or the most accurate learner, but is the one who uses all of his or her capacities in the most efficient way, and who handles the social and affective aspects of the learning process to the best advantage through self-regulation and self-motivation. The fully autonomous language learners in other words are the ones who develop themselves maximally, and represent an idealistic, psychological concept.

There is, however, also a political aspect to autonomy as discussed in the preceding sections. It is this aspect, I believe, to which Holec's (1981) definition mainly refers. It is the ability to create the possibility of learning *when* and *where* and *what* one wants to learn. It involves control, and that is a political concept. In a way political autonomy precedes psychological autonomy, because political autonomy allows students to use (and develop) their psychological autonomy. Consciousness again plays a role, for political autonomy requires consciousness of the society we live in, and of ourselves, and our role in that society. Figure 3.1 presents all the factors that influence the occurrence of an autonomous act of learning.

On the left hand side are elements related to *Control*. This refers to the political aspect of autonomy. Learners have to have the opportunity to take

responsibility for their learning. However, this alone is not sufficient. They need to be aware of this process and need to actively take responsibility for creating the opportunities that allow them to learn as they see fit. Empowerment is the job of society and its educators. If, and only if, this condition is met the section about *External-motivation* applies. *Self-motivation* refers to the process whereby learners are aware of the need to take responsibility for this affective aspect of their learning. External motivators (including teachers, materials, etc.) can support this.

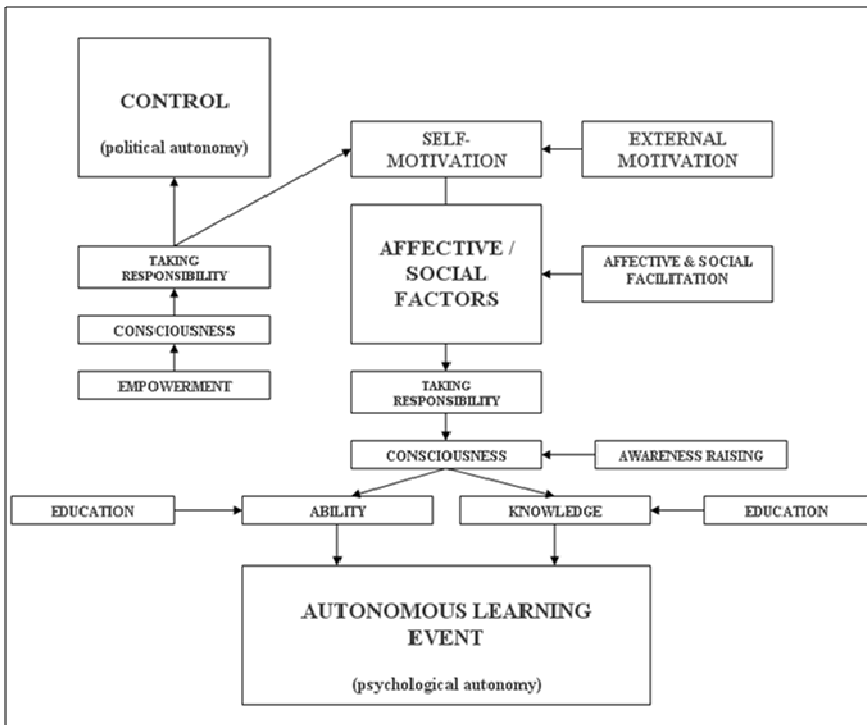


Figure 3.1. A Model of Autonomous Learning

Other affective and social factors influence what kind of learning, if any, will take place. Classrooms need to remove social and affective barriers. If the learner has the opportunity (political aspect), is motivated, and if no other affective, or social factors prohibit learning from taking place, then the actual act of learning is possible. This requires a degree of consciousness on the part of the learner, as argued above. Awareness-

raising, for example as part of a course, can facilitate this aspect. Learners need to have knowledge of their state of mind, the task at hand, their personal goals, and so forth. They also need skills (the ability) to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning based on this information. Education should develop or enhance the necessary knowledge and skills.

It is only if all these conditions are met, that we can speak of an act of autonomous learning. As a definition I thus propose: *Autonomous language learning is an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decisions about that learning.*

It is important to note that it is not possible or necessary during all acts of learning to be able or willing to consciously make decisions. Different learning situations pose different demands. Autonomy is not an either-or concept, but has to be seen as a continuum. One can be more or less autonomous and be so in different learning situations. Autonomy fluctuates over time, between skills and within skills. It is difficult to attain and is not necessarily permanent (once acquired it is not necessarily retained). It is for this reason that the definition speaks of *autonomous learning* rather than autonomy as a fixed capacity.

Operationalising Autonomy

Previous definitions have focused on different aspects of learner autonomy. By tracing the historical roots of learner autonomy as an educational concept grounded in political, societal and educational developments that have spanned many years, I hope to have shown that it is in fact a multi-faceted concept that consists of several layers. I also hope that the definition above shows that it is not possible, or at least not helpful, to speak of a learner as *autonomous* or *not autonomous* but that it is far more helpful to look at the actions a learner is engaged in and classify this as more or less autonomous learning. This has two pedagogical advantages. Firstly it avoids pigeon-holing students by applying some kind of static label to them. Instead of seeing learners as having or not having a certain capacity for autonomy, we can focus on their learning behavior in a particular context, and perhaps adapt our teaching, or the teaching context to suit our learners better. The second advantage is that by focusing on learning behavior, it is easier to identify, assess, and by extension encourage the development of autonomous learning. Instead of talking about autonomy as some kind of fixed and rather abstract entity, we can see it as a dynamic process that teachers and learners collaborate to achieve.

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