LEARNER INDEPENDENCE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CONCEPT OF CHANGE

Terry Lamb & Hayo Reinders

Abstract
Numerous changes have taken place in the field of language teaching in recent times. Some have to do with a change in how learners and their learning are viewed. Others result from the emergence of new opportunities and environments for learning, such as electronic communication or distance learning. Finally there is the reality of teaching in a world that places ever-changing demands and challenges on teachers, learners and institutions alike. A result of all of these is an increased interest in and need for the development of learner independence in all its forms. Different challenges in different contexts have led to different responses from the teaching profession. In this article we explore these challenges and responses and describe the different ways in which learner independence as both a concept and as a practice is being construed.

Introduction

The concept of learner independence has gradually emerged over the years to become one of the key terms in language teaching and indeed, in its manifestation as learner autonomy, one of its 'buzz words' (Little 1991, p.3). Various developments both from within and outside the field of language teaching have contributed to this. Below we will briefly discuss some of the earlier broader developments before discussing some more recent changes that have taken place. Next we look at how these developments have influenced language teachers, researchers, and their institutions and how they have resulted in a greater interest in different forms of independent learning.

Learner independence and learner autonomy – the emergence of a concept

Learner independence is a term that has been used in a number of ways. In part it overlaps with use of the term learner autonomy and may carry a connotation of a learner's *ability* to work independently and to take control over the learning process. However, independent learning in itself is also just a description of a mode of learning; learning that takes place independently from (usually) the teacher, though not necessarily independent from the *control* of the teacher, such as in the case of highly directed use of CALL (computer assisted language learning) which can merely replace traditional forms of teacher control.

Learner independence can therefore focus on *learning qualities* which are either intentionally encouraged and supported, or it can focus on the *learning context* in which the learner operates. In order to respond positively to the changes which will be described, this chapter will suggest that independent learners need to be seen as having knowledge, beliefs and skills which enable them to learn effectively in such contexts. It will also largely use the term *learner independence* in order to broaden the strokes of the picture it is painting, though occasionally the term *autonomy* will be used where this is more appropriate.

Interest in the autonomy of the individual probably dates back as far Aristotle and has, mainly through Kant, influenced political developments in the 20th century which have had a major impact on education. Especially after WW II a large number of minority rights movements sprang up that used the concept of autonomy to express their ideas about the right to freedom of choice. They saw education as a tool to empower people and instil in them a greater sense of awareness. As Jane (1977, cited by Holec 1981, p.3) writes:

> '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'.'

This echoes the influential work of Paulo Freire in Brazil. Freire's ideas revolve around the notion of education as empowerment and the development of a critical pedagogy which enables the 'oppressed' to fulfill their potential as human beings, 'aware of their activity and the world in which they are situated, acting in function of the objectives which they propose, having the seat of their decisions located in themselves and in their relations with the world and with others, infusing the world with their creative presence by means of the transformation they effect upon it' (Freire 1996, p.79).

In such political orientations, education is perceived as a way of enabling learners to shape their own and others' lives. This would probably involve handing over control to learners over the processes and content of learning. In the words of Collins & Hammond (1991, p.13) '…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'. Later developments of this thinking are the Language Awareness Movement (Hawkins 1981, 1984, James & Garrett 1991), Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough 1991) and others (cf. 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. An important aim was to increase peoples' awareness of the political aspect of language.

In addition, globalisation and its impact on society have influenced language education (Block & Cameron 2001). After WWII the demand for foreign and second languages sharply increased (Gremmo & Riley 1995). International

trade, easier communication, cheaper transport, international political developments (with the founding of organisations such as the UN), and migratory movements all led to an increase in the teaching of foreign and second languages. These developments influenced the content of what was taught, as communicative skills became more important than ever before. Broady & Kenning (1996, p.10) link this to a demand for different 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.'

Global changes in the availability of information (cheaper print materials, computer databases, the internet) also heavily influenced what is expected from people nowadays in terms of dealing with large amounts of (new) information, relating it to other information and interpreting it (Pemberton 1996). People need skills that allow them to adapt to quickly changing circumstances and develop new skills, for there is no longer a fixed body of knowledge that can be transmitted onto learners.

The impact of globalisation thus means that there are more university students coping with more information. This of course has resulted in rising costs. It is no longer possible to *teach* all students all they need to know (Trim 1976). Crabbe (1993, p.443) 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.'

Apart from the political and economic changes in the global context, there have been radical changes in understandings about pedagogy. Pedagogical influences largely came from developments in the area of psychology. As a reaction against behaviourism with its emphasis on observable changes in behaviour many psychologists started to see a more central role for the individual. Constructivism has had a great influence in this respect. It opposes positivist views of the world that see knowledge as an accurate reflection of objective reality. Knowledge, in positivist terms, can be discovered and also taught. Constructivism, however, sees knowledge as a reorganisation and restructuring of experience that cannot be taught, because it is unique to every individual (cf. Candy 1989).

In psychology, humanism as 'the study of personality focusing on the individual's *subjective* experience – his or her personal view of the world' (Atkinson 1993, p.544) becomes influential. It gives a central place to the unique individual. Experiences and insights are more important than behaviour.

'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)

In his theory of personal constructs, George Kelly tried to discover the dimensions that individuals use themselves (and not psychologists for them) to interpret or to construct themselves and their social worlds, believing that individuals hypothesise about and formulate their own theories about the world. In learning, this active and subjective process of construction of new knowledge is central to a person's development. This entails a shift to learning activities that are more *meaningful* to the learner, i.e. related to his or her own personal experience and needs. Awareness of the learning process is a prerequisite for successful learning. Also, if materials and classrooms are considered to be entities separate from personal experience and the immediate application of what is learned, they will not have an influence on overall personal constructs. Individuals must be able to construct their own private learning spaces according to their needs and fill them with personally meaningful learning material.

> 'In concrete terms, the humanistic curriculum puts high value on people accepting responsibility for their own learning, making decisions for themselves, choosing and initiating activities, expressing feelings and opinions about needs, abilities, and preferences.' (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p.75)

According to Dubin & Olshtain, the humanistic curriculum has the following goals and characteristics:

- emphasis on meaningful communication
- the learner is the focal point
- learning is a self-realisation experience in which the learner has considerable say in the decision-making process
- the teacher is a facilitator
- the first language of the learner is seen as an aid for understanding the target language
  (ibidem, p.76)

Recent changes – learner independence as a requirement
The purpose of the above has been to explore on a broad level how deeply and widely autonomy and learner independence are rooted in broader political, economic, social and pedagogical developments. All of these developments have had a significant impact on the field of language education and language education research. However, the concept of autonomy has particularly been taken on board since the late 1970s since when various additional rationales have been identified for its inclusion into teaching and learning. Many of these changes appear to involve a need for independence of some kind on the part of the learner. Sometimes this has been a positive influence, and sometimes less so, as we will see later. Below we will discuss some of these changes.

Changes related to the learner
Research and developments in learning
Autonomy has recently been linked to research on individual differences in language learning, such as ability, personality and learning styles, and has indeed been identified as a possible aspect of individual differences in itself (Reinders 2000, Jiménez Raya and Lamb 2003). It has also been linked to affect in language learning; greater autonomy can lead to higher levels of confidence and a more favourable self-perception (Lamb 2001), which again is linked to research in psychology on approaches to learning, such as proactive versus reactive (Knowles 1975). Another area of research that has strongly influenced the field has been motivation research where autonomy has been found to be related to intrinsic motivation (Deci et al 1991, Lamb 1997, 1998a, 2001, Ushioda 1997). In addition, although it has been difficult to describe *the* autonomous learner there appears to be a strong overlap with characteristics identified for the Good Language Leaner (Rubin 1975, Naiman et al 1978) and this too has been a fruitful area of research with various authors proposing that autonomy should be seen as a continuum in learning from more to less autonomous (Reinders & Cotterall 2001).

Inclusion and access to learning
Learners are increasingly demanding access to education. In the past this applied to minority groups and to women, and currently includes adult learners and learners who previously would not have had an opportunity to complete a tertiary education (witness the increase in the number of polytechnics and the transformation of many of them to universities). Such learners desire to learn languages for a whole range of reasons (Arthur & Beaton 2000). Also people in developing countries rightly demand more access to education, often overseas. People have become more vocal about their needs and are taking more control of their futures, including their education. This could be seen as a manifestation of independence. In higher education, it has resulted in a greater range of learners learning languages; they may be learning English in order to access the curriculum (Reinders 2004, Reinders forthcoming), or they may be learning a language for a specific purpose in order to supplement their main area of study. The growth of institution-wide language learning schemes in the UK is one example of this, where students of engineering, science, law or any other discipline may be working at a similar level of language but will expect a completely different specialist lexis (Ibaz et al 2002).

Learners' need for (physical) access to learning
As more learners from a broader social and cultural spectrum are staying on in education, they are increasingly needing to learn in places other than the traditional classroom. They can now more easily learn from home or work, but also in self-access centres, or obtain other forms of support such as peer-support online or from a language advisor via email. Such changes result in greater flexibility for the learner, more choices and greater freedom as to when and where, and often what to study. These changes frequently also require a greater ability on the part of the learner to make those choices, manage their own learning and sustain motivation.

Motivations for language learning
Language learners are identifying an ever-increasing range of reasons for wishing to study a language. In the UK, for example, there is a reduction in the number of specialist language learners in higher education, but an overwhelming increase in those involved in language learning as a supplementary skill (ALL et al 2003), and these learners are identifying many reasons for language learning, as well as a desire to study a broader range of languages (Kenning 2001). The development of vocational language courses has added to this diversity, but again this demands greater flexibility to cater for a variety of vocational contexts (Wilson & Ibarz 2000).

Learners' expectations of learning support
Learners are increasingly expecting to be supported in their learning, not just to be given access to information. A good example of this is the large number of students who go overseas for an education and learn a second language. Their knowledge of and demand for different types of support has become increasingly sophisticated. One study (Reinders et al 2003) for example found that the presence of a self-access centre was now seen by many students as an important factor in choosing a university.

Changes related to the teaching institution
Expansion of provision
As mentioned above, the number of students in higher education has grown dramatically over the last 20 years. In addition the student body has changed significantly with now many more adult learners and foreign students participating. This has often come as a direct result of the marketisation of education which means that educational institutions are now having to compete with one another for funding. In addition, in some contexts government funding is allocated on the basis of student numbers. Market forces place great stress on resources and staff, and this, ironically, has in some circumstances led to a reduction in staffing to accompany the expansion in student numbers. Institutions have responded to these challenges in different ways as we shall see below. For example, alternative forms of language support in some cases have led to more individual learning, with a concomitant need for more sophisticated independent learning skills.

Responding to changing learner needs
The changes in learners' needs outlined above, combined with an increased recognition that it is necessary to see the learner at the centre of the curriculum (Nunan 1987) have led to an increase in an institution's need to offer a diversified provision. This has led to an exploration of new forms of teaching and learning, such as distance education. Many of these require a greater degree of autonomy from the learners.

Responding to new technologies
The development of new technologies offers many opportunities for new pedagogical developments as well as for innovation and expansion. Moreover, in a market-driven context, the need to offer up-to-date facilities for learning is paramount in order to appeal to potential students. Learning with new technologies often means learning independently which, in turn, leads to

a need to consider the pedagogical and methodological implications of such learning modes (Lamb 2003).

c) Changes related to society
Linguistic capital
As the world becomes smaller, there is an increasing need for communication between people. Economic success very often is related to this, and governments and companies are realising this. Indeed, some countries, such as Malaysia and China, are recognising this and promoting new forms of language learning (Lamb 1998b). Furthermore, English is not enough despite its dominance as a major global language; there is a need to speak the language of the customer both in international markets and, increasingly, in economic and social relationships between communities within a country (Edwards 2001, Graddol 1997, 1998, Lamb 1998c). This has been recognised within the expanding European Community, for example, where 'mother tongue plus two' is being promoted as a minimum language requirement (Jones 1998, Phillipson 2003), and a necessary support for European employee mobility. The demand for language learning is consequently increasing around the world. Self-study is promoted by the European Language Council as a viable means of achieving these goals.

Social justice and inclusion
As more and more countries become multilingual as a result of global migration, issues arise regarding the place of the languages of the various communities in the mainstream curriculum. For a number of reasons which relate to the linguistic needs of the individual and his/her developing bilingualism, and to the development of a successfully multicultural society, it is important that a wider range of languages are offered in schools and universities (Lamb 1999, 2001).

Responses: independence as a challenge
Education providers have responded to the above challenges in different ways. Broadly speaking they have led to a) changes in pedagogy and b) changes in provisions of language support.

The increased need for skills for independent learning which accompanies the recent changes discussed above has been taken by some institutions and policy makers as a challenge to update current thinking about language learning and the role of educators in facilitating it. This has led to an increased interest in the concept of autonomy and ways of fostering it through classroom teaching, witness the numerous and growing number of organisations and conferences related to this topic. This has resulted in changes in teaching practice characterised by a more central role for the learner. Learners are given opportunities for reflection and are given responsibility for aspects of their learning that were previously firmly in the domain of the teacher such as planning and assessment. A description of all the ways in which this has been or can be done falls well outside the scope of this chapter as they encompass such diverse areas as flexible learning, blended learning, metacognition and learner reflection, as well as tools such as learning journals and portfolios, and formative assessment. Suffice it to say that different schools and

individual teachers have gone down this path further and in different ways than others. Many teachers interested in this topic, however, report constraints resulting from their work environments (Benson 2000, Breen and Mann 1997, Lamb 2000, McGrath 2000). Handing over control to learners may have implications for curriculum design, assessment practices, and a whole range of other aspects of teaching and learning that can only be properly organised at the level of the institution, or sometimes even the national education system (for example if self-assessment is accepted as a viable alternative to traditional testing). Well-meaning teachers often face difficulties when implementing change individually. Several countries have incorporated the fostering of autonomous learning as a goal of language education in their respective national curricula (e.g. the Netherlands, Finland, Hong Kong). However, there remains much work to be done for autonomy to become fully integrated into 'regular' language teaching.

Two fairly common tools for the development of independent learning skills have been the provision of learner training either as part of regular classroom teaching or as a separate subject (or sometimes even as short courses; cf. Morley & Truscott 2001) and strategy instruction (Ellis and Sinclair 1989, Oxford 1990, Wenden 1987, 1991). Especially a focus on learner strategies as a way of making learning more efficient and enjoyable is now more or less commonplace in classrooms the world over. However, an inclusion of learner strategies in teaching does not necessarily equate the development of independence. There are different types of strategies some of which are clearly more related to raising learners' awareness than others. Cognitive strategies (such as ways of improving vocabulary retention) are helpful but, without a focus on metacognitive strategies (such as identifying language needs), do not result in autonomy (learners can be excellent vocabulary learners but be unable to know when to learn what type of vocabulary and what vocabulary to learn first).

The other general response from educational providers has been to look for alternative ways of supporting language learning. The provision of self-access centres has been a popular option. Benson & Voller (1997, p.15) claim that: 'Self-Access resource centres are the most typical means by which institutions have attempted to implement notions of autonomy and independence over the last twenty years (…).' However, self-access centres have also been used with other underlying reasons. One recent study (Reinders et al 2003) investigated 15 tertiary level self-access centres in Australia and New Zealand. It found that in some cases self-access was genuinely seen as a way of individualising learning and of introducing the concept of autonomy into the curriculum. However, in other cases self-access was seen as an economical alternative to the provision of teacher-based learning. Australian national education policy specifies 25 hours as the minimum for accreditation as a full-time language course but allows five hours for 'guided self-study' without specifying what that means. Some institutions used self-access time for these 5 hours but did not provide proper training or guidance. Independence was a prerequisite for the students here to be successful, not a desirable outcome of a successful language support centre.

Other recent additions to the arsenal of educational provisions include (computer-based) distance education and e-learning. These are responses to the need for greater flexibility and easier access to education. Both require a set of skills on the part of the learner, as well as a reappraisal of the role of the teacher (or facilitator or counsellor) (Crabbe et al 2001, Pemberton et al 2001, Voller et al 1999). Several authors (cf. White, forthcoming**)** have pointed out the need for training and ongoing support for these types of learning to be successful and specifically for a need for the development of independent learning skills. As with self-access there is a danger that these skills are taken for granted.

The above are only a few examples of where concurrent pressures clash. On the one hand we have seen an increase in the number of people learning languages. In addition we have seen that a number of changes (both inside and outside of education) require a degree of independence from the learner. The different responses by institutions to these challenges have generally involved an increased need for language support provided in a variety of ways. However, the support offered does require additional support. Unfortunately, as educational providers have not all yet come to terms with the implications of this, the right kind of support is often not available, or support is inadequate. One reason for this is the increased corporatism of education: language support is subjected to a careful cost analysis which sometimes leaves the benefit for the learner out of the equation.

Conclusion
We chose the term 'learner independence' for the title of this chapter with a reason. The concept of autonomy which has been implicated by much of what we have described above has a qualitative connotation. Autonomous learners are more motivated, more aware, more proactive, etcetera. However, the types of learning offered by many institutions do not necessarily result in such learning, even though they nonetheless require the learner to possess such qualities if they are to be successful in their learning. Independent learning is thus broader than autonomous learning: independent learning can be autonomous but is not necessarily so. This is where it becomes clear that the ways in which the changes discussed above have been responded to in quite different ways.

The diagram below offers a conceptualisation of the different levels of response. In some cases the challenges have not been responded to at all. In other cases only cosmetic changes are taking place, such as in the example of some self-access provision given above. Many institutions are merely coping with change, reacting to challenges as they come along. Others are on the way to anticipating them and finding ways of dealing with them ('consolidation'). Yet others initiate changes and are fully proactive. These responses can take place at different levels. Sometimes individual forerunners are the first to notice change and find ways of dealing with it. At other times it is one department in a university, or a professional organisation, and, as we have seen above, in several cases it has been the government.

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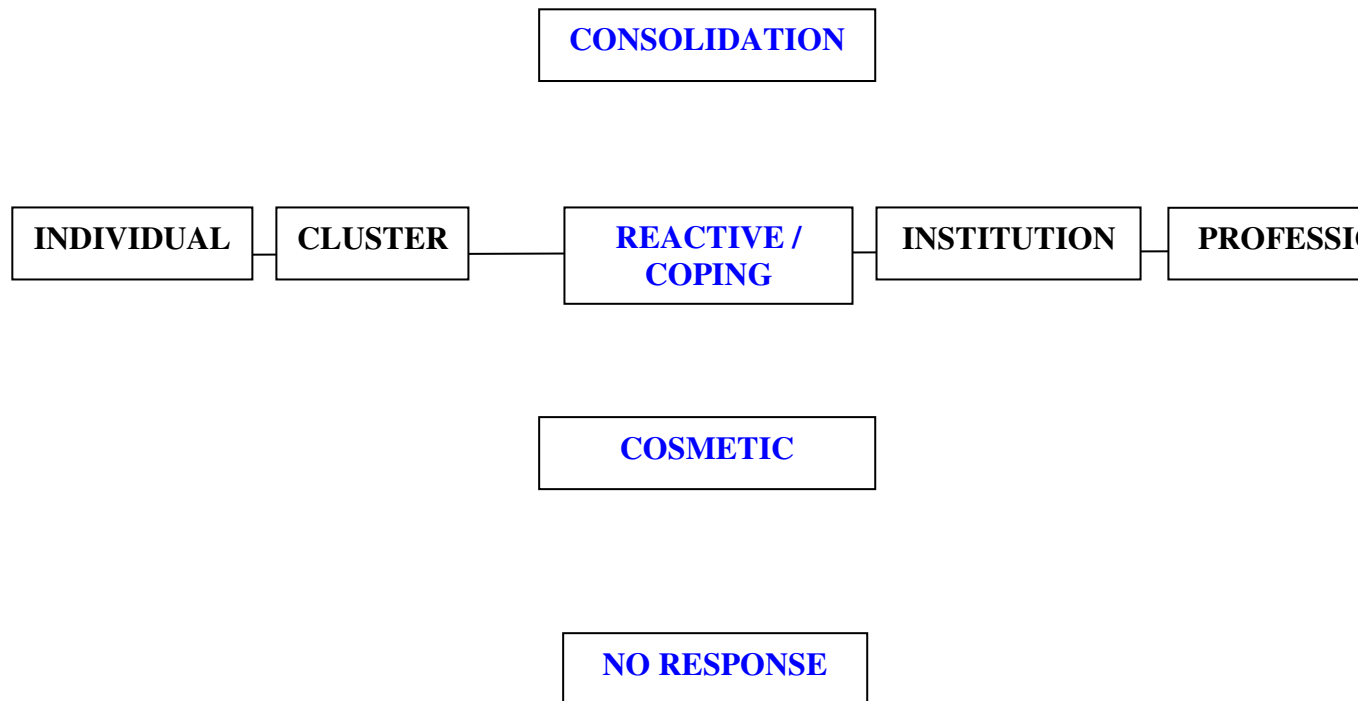
Such models tend to appear static but they in fact represent a dynamic reality. The context of this model is one of rapid change which is building on shifting foundations. Education has seen and continues to see a number of profound changes, many of which are the result of major changes in global society. We have shown that a common consequence of these has been the need for, even demand for, learner independence. How this is addressed varies widely, is ever developing and is itself in turn influenced by broader changes. One major implication of this is that we need to understand in a comparative sense what learner independence means in different contexts, what is driving it, and how the changes are manifesting themselves. Only then will we be able to evaluate such changes in order to ensure that learners are being prepared and supported adequately.

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Bio data
Terry Lamb is Director of Initial Teacher Education at the University of Sheffield, convenor of the AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning, a Governor of CILT, the National Centre for Languages, and former President of the Association for Language Learning.

Hayo Reinders is Director of the English Language Self-Access Centre at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, co-founder of the Independent Learning Association, and a speaker for the Royal Society of New Zealand.