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A framework for learning beyond the classroom

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The importance of learning beyond the classroom

The importance of Learning Beyond the Classroom (LBC) is self-evident in that few people remain formal language learners their entire lives. For most learners (and their teachers) the ideal outcome of education is to not only have developed their language skills to a desired point but also to have developed their language learning skills so as to enable them to continue to learn without the help of a teacher.

Less obviously, but equally importantly, even for learners in formal education a considerable proportion of their learning (and personally I would argue that, for successful learners at least, this proportion is the majority), takes place outside the classroom, in the form of homework, independent activities such as listening to music in the target language, browsing the internet, playing digital games, and a myriad other activities (see Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015; and Lai 2017 for examples of the wide range of language learning experiences learners create for themselves).

Furthermore, a significant impetus for learning derives from experiences of using the language beyond the classroom; whether it be through a family holiday in a foreign country or a romantic encounter, the motivation to learn in most cases resides outside of formal education. This provides an obvious case for the importance of LBC in the language learning process, both during and following classroom education, and presents obvious links with the topic of learner autonomy. Yet, we know remarkably little about what goes on outside the classroom. Only since the 'social turn' (Block, 2003) has more attention been paid to learners' personal, social, and situated experiences in a holistic way and only in the last decade or so, or at least with the start of the 'affective turn' (Pavlenko, 2013), more studies have started to investigate learners' internal lives, their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and their personal lives beyond formal education, including the types of activities they engage in outside the classroom. Although still a small proportion of research output in language education research (by my estimate of perusing the content pages of the top 10 ranked journal in our field over the last 2 years, around 5%), we do now at least start to gain more insight into the full experience learners bring to their education and the relationship between their formal education and their LBC. What still remains less clear, however, is how practitioners can actively create links between the classroom and life beyond it. The purpose of this chapter then is to offer a framework that teachers – and researchers – can use to plan for, develop, deliver, and investigate instruction that draws on the full range of affordances in learners' language learning ecologies (for a discussion of the concept of 'ecologies', see below). I will begin by briefly reviewing current classroom practice in relation to LBC. Next, I will delve more deeply into the construct of LBC and what it encompasses, before proposing a framework for LBC, which I will describe in detail.

The practice of LBC

In many contexts, language educators indicate that they understand and believe in the importance of learner autonomy (e.g. Borg & Busaidi, 2011; Lin & Reinders, forthcoming). Teachers – generally – say they want to prepare learners for future learning and want them to

take control over the learning process. Yet, in practice, most classrooms see little evidence of teacher behaviour that actively promotes or supports this. It is important to ask why this is, and it is an area of inquiry that has kept me preoccupied for nearly 20 years. As most teachers are inducted into the profession through formal education in the form of language teaching qualifications, a reasonable site of investigation is the programmes that are available and the ways in which they introduce new teachers to topics related to autonomy and LBC. A reasonable question to ask is: to what extent do language teacher education programmes actively develop in teachers the skills necessary to foster autonomy and to support LBC? To partially answer this question, In Reinders & Balcikanli (2011a) we selected the then 11 most widely-used course books in initial language teacher education courses to identify if and if so, how, information about a) autonomy, and b) ways of fostering autonomy was included. We applied the framework of self-directed learning skills (Reinders, 2010; see for a description below) and to our surprise (and disappointment) found that the resources ‘included almost no information about learner autonomy at all and did not, with one or two minor exceptions, focus on the development of skills for supporting autonomous learning’ (p. 97). As a follow-up, we then looked at the five most popular general English-language textbooks used in language classes worldwide and again looked for evidence of the inclusion of autonomy-related topics and skills. We found very few examples of this and when we did, it mostly took the form of information about skills (for example, reminders of the importance to ‘practise by yourself often’), mostly without a clear rationale and – more worryingly – without opportunities for practice in developing and applying the skill. Reinders & Lewis (2005) then looked for evidence of active instruction in or support for LBC in self-access resources and found very minimal examples only. Even self-access CALL resources offered little support (Reinders & Lewis, 2006), with quite a few not even including answer keys or suggestions to enable learners to work independently.

Perhaps not surprisingly given the above, teachers’ classroom practices are often not particularly autonomy-supportive, even when teachers think they are. In a current longitudinal study of four teachers in Thailand Intraboonsom, Darasawang, and Reinders (2016), found that autonomy-related instruction mainly involved mentioning certain aspects of learning autonomously, but little explanation or rationale, and even less opportunity for controlled practice.

What this shows is the need for teachers to develop greater awareness, not just of the importance of autonomy – its ‘why’, but also of the ways in which it can be implemented – its ‘how’. Below, I will propose a framework to support practitioners, and researchers, in considering ways for developing a pathway to learner autonomy in their classes. Before we do so, however, it is necessary to briefly examine what LBC entails.

What is learning beyond the classroom?

Learning beyond the classroom (although it is not quite the same, it is – also referred to as ‘learning in the wild’) is a catch-all phrase for types of learning (and the corollary instructional support) that fall outside of, or extend teacher-led classroom instruction. In 2017 Reinders & Benson (drawing on Benson 2011) proposed a clarification of the term, based on four dimensions of LBC (see Table 1).

The first of these is location, which relates to the physical or virtual space in which learning takes place. Traditionally, learning has been viewed as occurring within the four walls of the language classroom, although correspondence education has been available for at least 3000 years. (The largest of these programmes involved one of the state universities in China, which at its peak had over one million students.) The advent of technology has released the classroom from its physical restraints, with blended and fully online forms of distance learning becoming possible.

However, many other locations are available, from the home, to the community, to study abroad, as well as intermediary spaces such as self-access or independent learning centres. The second dimension is the degree of formality involved in the learning, or the degree to which learning is linked to formal qualifications. Naturalistic learning is an example of language learning that involves, in its extreme form, no formal education at all (although in practice many learners do participate in some formal learning as well). The third dimension is pedagogy, or the degree to which teaching is involved. Language advising sessions are an example of a learning space in which no subject matter is taught (learners are supported in directing their own learning), but which are usually offered in formal contexts within schools or universities. Finally, control refers to who makes decisions about the learning. In traditional classrooms, this is the teacher. In naturalistic settings, the learner. But intermediate forms are possible – and common; a self-directed learner may study from a book that simply replaces the teacher’s voice and provides all instruction, structure, and feedback that may be found in a regular classroom.

The four dimensions interrelate to create a unique tapestry of possible learning configurations, each of which benefits from its own form of observation and — where appropriate — measurement. For example, a MOOC (massive online open course) environment offers a virtual (but not a physical) space that may be formal, non-formal, or something in between, that involves both direct teaching and considerable self-directed learning, and in which decisions relating to content and structure are usually made by the instructor(s), although many other decisions are made by the learners (see Jitpaissarnwattana & Reinders, 2018). In this case, language learning outcomes are not the only aspect of the learning process that are of interest; so is the learners’ ability to manage their own learning, create (virtual) collaborations with other learners, self-motivate and so on. Clearly, a range of approaches and instruments would be beneficial in a situation like this, the combination of which is likely to be quite different from assessment in a classroom-based course.

DIMENSIONS OF LBC	TERMS
<p>.....LOCATION.....</p> <p>When and where learning takes place</p>	<p>Out-of-class, after-class, extra-curricular, self-access, out-of-school, distance</p>
<p>.....FORMALITY.....</p> <p>The degree to which learning is linked to educational qualifications or structured by educational institutions</p>	<p>Informal, non-formal, naturalistic</p>
<p>.....PEDAGOGY.....</p> <p>The degree to which teaching is involved</p>	<p>Non-instructed, self-instructed</p>
<p>.....CONTROL.....</p> <p>How decisions are distributed between the learner and others</p>	<p>Autonomous, independent, self-regulated</p>

The terminology covered by LBC is broad and each term has its own history, which in some cases is of considerable depth and breadth. A full description of this is beyond the scope of this chapter (but see Benson, 2011 for an overview). However, the terms share some characteristics that are relevant in a discussion of measurement and evaluation. In short, the last few decades (at least from the 1970s onwards) have seen a development towards a) greater learner-centredness, b) greater understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of learning, c) (more recently) greater understanding of the learners (including the ways in which they shape their own learning), and d) the learning ecologies available to them. This interest has led to a greater interest in the individual experience of learning and how the unique constellation of opportunities, constraints, aspirations and beliefs (to name a few) shapes the what, the how, and the why of learning. Research areas such as ‘L2 identity’ (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009) ‘learners’ stories’ (Benson & Nunan, 2005), and ‘the psychology of the language learner’ (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015) are only some examples of emerging fields, all of which place great importance on the whole learner as a person, not just the role someone plays inside the classroom. All of these developments have considerable implications for measurement and evaluation. If the individual learner is the primary focus of our interest, then at the very least should that learner not play an active role in the evaluation, as it is only the learner who knows deeply what was aimed for, and thus what was achieved? And if we value the learner, then should we not at least attempt to document, let alone understand, all aspects of that learner’s life that impinge upon their learning?

The framework

In drawing on the above challenges, we propose an array of options based on a framework for LBC developed by the author (Reinders, 2018). The framework starts from the viewpoint of a learning ecology, comprised of (overlapping) in-class and beyond-class learning opportunities (see Figure 1.1).

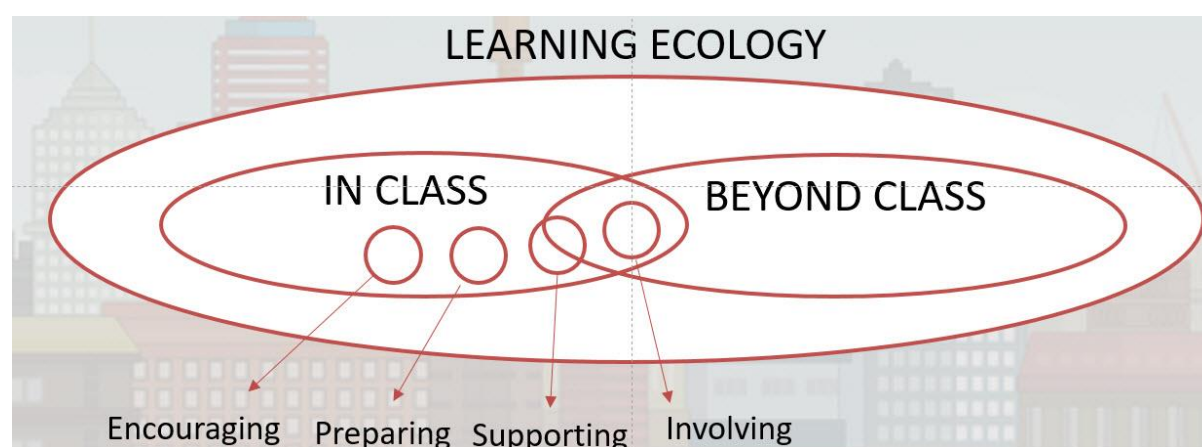


Figure 1.1 – An Ecology For Moving From In-Class To Beyond-Class Learning

The teacher and learning environment’s role includes a gradual process of moving learners from in-class to beyond class learning through four stages — 1) encouraging LBC through raising awareness and motivating, 2) preparing for LBC through controlled practice in class, 3) supporting LBC by providing assistance (e.g. through monitoring and feedback, guided activities, help), and 4) offering learning opportunities that involve LBC with minimal assistance. This process is situated in an ecology of learning that sees learning in class and beyond it as interrelated. As Jackson describes it, ‘An individual’s learning ecology comprises their process and set of contexts, relationships and interactions that provides opportunities and resources for learning, development and achievement’ (2015, p. 1). Clearly this includes both formal ‘in class’

and forms of 'beyond class' of learning. This 'ecology' has been described by Siemens (2007, p. 63) as:

- Adaptive, dynamic and responsive — the ecology enables (or more specifically fosters) adaptation to the needs of the agents within the space.
- Chaotic — diversity generates chaos which is created in dynamic environments and systems.
- Self-organising and individually directed — organisation occurs through the ongoing interactions of elements within the ecology.
- Alive — features continual changes, newness, activity
- Diverse — with multiple viewpoints and nodes (often contradictory) exist.
- Structured informality — structure enables ongoing diversity of openness not restricting development. Minimal control is required to function but no more.
- Emerging — the space itself is evolving and adaptive.

This description makes it clear that the overall ecology is one that is highly complex and one that teachers can draw on to greatly extend their 'reach'. If considering data obtained in a formal classroom setting, four levels of development towards LBC are observed: from initial encouragement (usually by a teacher or language advisor) to consider opportunities beyond the classroom, to active preparation (for example through strategy instruction), to the provision of support during LBC (for example in the form of [online] guidance and feedback), and learning fully beyond the classroom (with or without links back to a classroom).

For each of these a distinction can be made between the four dimensions of LBC discussed above and evidence of learning can be considered in terms of its

Location: In what physical and/or virtual space(s) does the learning take place?

Formality: To what extent is the learning linked to qualifications?

Pedagogy: To what extent is instruction involved?

Control: How much choice do the learners exert?

Combined, the two elements of LBC (its characteristics and the four stages towards its development), provide an opportunity to plan (and monitor the implementation of) classroom practice (see Figure 1.2) .

Tasks	Locations	Formality	Pedagogy	Control
for encouraging LBC				
preparing for LBC				
supporting LBC				
involving LBC				

xxx Figure 1.2 A framework for Task Design

The above could be used to facilitate a fine-grained observation of the nature of the different stages in a course, or even across a curriculum, towards the adoption of LBC. Such a multi-dimensional approach may give useful insights, such as the realisation that learner A, who exclusively and slavishly follows the instructions in her self-study materials outside the classroom, may be less autonomous and make fewer individual choices than learner B, who shows evidence of initiative and control within a classroom led by a teacher.

Despite its usefulness for planning and observation purposes, many practitioners may feel such a model to be too abstract, as it does not include (examples of) the types of skills that would need to be developed in learners to enable them to autonomously engage in LBC. For this we can turn to the literature on skills development for self-directed and autonomous learning. In particular the earlier work of Malcolm Knowles (1975) has been highly influential here, as it has enabled practitioners and researchers to tease out the different elements of self-directed learning, so that they could be supported in a structured and comprehensive manner. In the past, I have drawn on Knowles' work to develop a framework for classroom teachers for the development of learner autonomy (Reinders, 2010), adapted for use in the field of language education. The framework and its individual components are included in Figure 1.3.

<FIGURE 1.3 HERE>



Figure 1.3 The Stages of the Self-directed Learning Process

A detailed description of each of its elements falls beyond the scope of this chapter (but see the 2010 publication referred to above for full details), especially the broader instructional frames for 'reflection', 'motivation', and 'interaction', but the individual stages will be familiar to most readers. Starting from 'identifying learning needs', and in an iterative fashion working through each of the steps, learners can be supported in developing awareness of the requirements for successful self-directed learning, and given instruction, feedback and opportunities for practice both inside and outside the classroom.

When these self-directed learning elements are combined with the different phases in the development of skills for LBC, a potentially powerful framework emerges. Figure 1.4X shows all three aspects of instruction for LBC combined.



The horizontal axis includes the four characteristics of LBC, 'location', 'formality', 'pedagogy', and 'control'. These can be considered in order to ensure a wide range of elements of the LBC ecology is covered. Practitioners can, for example, plan their course in such a way that a balance is achieved, and that appropriate levels of, say, formality and control are offered for learners at a given time and developmental level.

The z-axis includes the eight components of self-directed learning described in Figure 1.4 X above, and these enable teachers to ensure all key elements are given attention and sufficient opportunity is made available for their development.

Combining all three aspects may enable practitioners to, for example, consider whether learners have been made aware of and given a rationale for ('encouraging') the usefulness of 'identifying your learning' needs when studying at home ('location'), before expecting them to be able to carry out independent learning activities ('involving'), that require them engage in 'planning their learning', outside the context of school ('formality'). In other words, although none of the elements in the framework are rigidly prescriptive (for example, there may be good reason to have learners experience LBC first ['supporting'] before talking about its importance ['encouraging'] and before breaking down the activity in its component parts), they do offer a reminder of the importance of the whole process as a longitudinal journey towards increased skill development and confidence-building. Such a structured and balanced approach may go a long way towards avoiding the common observation that many teachers 'do' autonomy by telling students to make their own choices or by expecting them to successfully engage in LBC, without preparation, guidance or practice.

Researching LBC and recommendations for future developments

The framework above can be used for research purposes in that it will enable the careful observation and mapping of instructional practices. For example, is there a progress from 'encouraging' to 'involving'? Do learners have an opportunity to practise in a wide range of 'locations', or are activities always limited to the physical classroom? Are learners shown how to set goals before being asked to select appropriate resources? In what ways are classroom activities structured and balanced across all elements? Of course, such questions can be investigated comparatively too: in what ways does classroom x differ from classroom y in this regard? Which of these classrooms is more successful?

Clearly, such questions have important implications for teaching practice but they may also help to identify some of the impact that autonomy-related activities have on learners. Are learners who experience more opportunities for practice, for example, more confident and more actively engaged in LBC than learners who are less prepared? What types of instructional activities are correlated most clearly with successful outcomes?

As a field, the study of learner (and teacher) autonomy has come a very long way in the last few decades. We do have some very wide open roads ahead of us, though. What a marvellous prospect.

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