Learner autonomy

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The idea of learner autonomy is not new, but it has been widely referred to in the field of ELT only over the last decade. Previously, terms referring more directly to practical interventions or *situations* of learning were more favoured within ELT: 'individualization', then 'learner independence' for example. One sign of the shift to 'learner autonomy' as a preferred term has been the recent name change of the IATEFL 'Learner Independence' Special Interest Group (SIG) to 'Learner Autonomy' SIG.

Imported originally from the fields of politics and moral philosophy, 'autonomy' is a multifaceted concept whose meaning has been discussed in the specialist language learning literature from many perspectives and in an increasingly academic fashion (see Benson 2001, 2007 for overviews). Here I take a few relatively standard definitions at face value and highlight their practical provenance and significance both as a 'way in' to the specialist literature and as a kind of antidote to its developing 'theology'.

Though seemingly abstract, the notion of learner autonomy was first developed out of practice—that of teacher-researchers at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL), University of Nancy, France, in the early 1970s. According to the former Director of CRAPEL, Henri Holec (personal communication), the need for a term to describe people's *ability* to take charge of their own learning (for this is how he and his colleagues came to conceptualize 'learner autonomy': see Holec 1979/1981) arose for practical, though idealistic reasons. In the interests of widening access to education and promoting lifelong learning, CRAPEL began to offer adults the opportunity to learn a foreign language in a resources centre, free from teacher direction. However, it soon became clear that participants did not necessarily—initially, at least—have the full *capacity* (competence) to take charge of decision-making in all the areas normally determined by an institution, teacher, or textbook, namely:

- objectives
- contents (including materials)
- stages ('syllabus')
- methods and techniques
- pace, time, and place
- evaluation procedures.

CRAPEL put in place various kinds of support measures, including learner counselling and 'training', to assist in the 'autonomization' process—the

development of learners' abilities to work more effectively in a self-directed fashion.

Holec's distinction between a desirable learning *situation* or *behaviour* ('self-directed learning') and the *capacity* for such learning ('learner autonomy') has been generally accepted in the specialist literature (as summarized in Benson 2001, 2007; see also Little 1991). This distinction enables us to see that learner autonomy may only be involved in arrangements which are often associated with the term—CALL, self-access, and distance learning, for example—to the extent that decision-making in the areas identified by Holec (above) is genuinely in the hands of the learner. Additionally, such forms of learning may *require* the exercise of autonomy, but they do not necessarily *develop* this capacity.

This highlights an important continuing role for teachers in promoting the psychological attributes and practical abilities involved in learner autonomy and in engaging students' existing autonomy within classroom practice (see Benson 2001, for a useful overview of different pedagogical approaches, and Dam 1995, for an account of innovative classroom practice). Indeed, a belief in the value of *interdependent* learning in classrooms and beyond—combined with a desire to counter prevalent 'individualistic' interpretations of the notion of autonomy—led leading practitioners to develop the so-called 'Bergen definition'. This views learner autonomy as 'a capacity and willingness to act independently *and* in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person' (Dam *et al.* 1990: 102).

There persists a tension, however, between pedagogical approaches which construe autonomy primarily as something learners lack and so need to be 'trained towards' and those which take as a starting point the idea that learners—of whatever background culture—are already able, at least to some degree, to exercise control over their own learning (Smith 2003). *Supportive engagement* of learners' existing autonomy (by the teacher) can be seen as an important basis for its progressive development; indeed, the notion that learners have the power and right to learn for themselves is seen by many proponents as a fundamental tenet. On the other hand, learner training and other approaches which attempt to fit learners into preconceived models of the 'ideal autonomous learner' may lend support to the criticism that autonomy is a western concept inappropriate for 'non-western' students (ibid.).

However, as Little (1991) has emphasized, learner autonomy is not a particular method, nor need it be conflated with individualism. From this perspective, the exercise and development of learner autonomy can be seen as an educational goal which is cross-culturally valid—even though working with it as a guiding concept requires different forms of pedagogy and meets with different kinds of constraint according to context (Palfreyman and Smith 2003; Barfield and Brown 2007).

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