1

Introduction: Reconstructing Learner and Teacher Autonomy in Language Education

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Introduction

Attempts to achieve large-scale pedagogical innovation are depressingly prone to failure. A new theoretical concept stimulates the development of novel approaches; these are implemented by a small group of pioneers whose enthusiasm creates a band-wagon effect; as a result the theoretical concept is simplified and the pedagogical approaches are diluted; and what seemed at first to promise so much gradually disappears in the mainstream, to be followed in due course by another innovation – which will probably meet the same fate.

The communicative turn that seemed set to revolutionize language education in the 1970s and '80s, at least in Europe, provides a good example of this phenomenon. A new approach to the description of language use and the definition of learning objectives (the functional-notional specifications pioneered by the Council of Europe: van Ek 1975; Coste et al. 1976; Baldegger et al. 1980) coincided with two strong desires on the part of national educational systems: to extend the reach of foreign language teaching, and in doing so to ensure that learners could make at least some communicative use of the languages they learnt. For a few years, those who embraced communicative language teaching were bold and energetic pioneers. They elaborated new curricula, experimented with new pedagogical techniques, and developed new learning materials; sometimes they devised new forms of assessment. The strong resistance they often encountered heightened their sense of adventure as it strengthened their resolve. With time more and more curricula came to specify communicative goals, textbooks were sold on the basis of their communicative claims, and the heat went out of the revolution. By the mid 1980s it was no longer daring to be a communicative language

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teacher: the whole language teaching world had become communicative – except, of course, that it hadn't. In the process of absorption, the term 'communicative' had been largely emptied of its original content and in most language classrooms things went on much as before. The key insights of the communicative pioneers are as valid now as they were thirty years ago: if we want learners to develop communicative proficiency in an L2 our curricula should say what we want them to be able to do in that language; and they will achieve communicative proficiency to the extent that spontaneous language use plays a central role in the teaching–learning process. Yet communicative language teaching is seen by many as a fashion that has had its day, and those who use the term 'post-communicative' presumably judge that it was an experiment that failed.

The concept of learner autonomy entered the language teaching debate at the end of the 1970s, only a few years after the communicative revolution had been launched. Thanks partly to the variety of contexts in which it was pursued, it quickly assumed a variety of meanings and emphases, at the same time becoming a common curriculum goal; and, like the communicative approach, it did not escape dilution. For many language teachers these days 'communicative' simply means making sure that the target language is heard in the classroom; it doesn't necessarily imply that learners use the language spontaneously to communicate their own meanings. Similarly, learner autonomy is often understood to entail nothing more than allowing learners choice – not necessarily an open choice, but the opportunity to select from two or three alternatives offered by the teacher. But whereas the armies of the communicative revolution seem to have dispersed, the much smaller forces that have explored and promoted learner autonomy in theory and practice remain strong, determined and surprisingly coherent. There are no doubt a number of reasons why this should be so, but one seems to me particularly significant. The communicative revolution appeared to move straightforwardly from theory to practice; concern with learner autonomy on the other hand has mostly shuttled back and forth between practice and theory. Communicative theorists were by no means all practitioners; by contrast, learner autonomy theory has mostly been developed by practitioners of one kind or another – teachers working in classrooms, teacher educators, those responsible for designing and evaluating self-access language learning systems, educational researchers charged with implementing innovation. Theoretical perspectives on learner autonomy have thus been continually tested and refined as they have been brought up against the hard realities of language learning and language teaching.

This tendency is present in the contributions to this book, all of which focus on a practical issue in a particular context, and it explains why the first word in the title of the book is 'reconstructing' rather than simply 'constructing'. By applying our present understanding of learner autonomy to the practical challenges of specific educational contexts, we make it possible to enlarge and sometimes modify that understanding. In this way we gradually refine (or reconstruct) our theory even as we refine (or reconstruct) our pedagogical practice. My purpose in what follows is to illustrate this back-and-forthness between practice and theory with reference to my own experience over almost thirty years in three quite distinct domains: self-access language learning, classroom teaching, and a European project designed to promote learner autonomy on a continental scale. In doing so, I shall anticipate some of the dominant themes in the rest of the book: the role of interaction and interdependence in the empowerment of learners (and teachers); the need to negotiate and construct learner autonomy afresh in each new programme of learning; the unique individuality of each learning (and teaching) process; the ultimate goal of discovering and validating personal authenticity.

Self-access language learning: an early experiment

In 1978 my university opened a new Arts and Social Sciences Building that was equipped with the latest language laboratory facilities. For about fifteen years regular language laboratory classes had been part of the language teaching provided by the modern language departments. These classes were set to continue, but the university also expected that the new installations would be exploited in new ways. It was my responsibility to meet this expectation. I was already familiar with the concept of the self-instructional language laboratory, so an obvious course of action was to establish a large library of audio cassettes – listening materials, pronunciation practice, structure drills – and advertise its availability to the student population at large. I fondly imagined that students of languages, and perhaps of other subjects too, would gratefully crowd our facilities; but of course they didn't. I was neither the first nor the last to discover that the capacity for self-directed learning is not widespread among university students. Wondering how to address this problem, I was quickly led to the concept of learner autonomy via the short report that Henri Holec had just written for the Council of Europe (Holec, 1981).

Holec's report offers a definition of learner autonomy that remains foundational: 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec,

1981: 3). Inspired by contemporary theories in adult education, this definition coincides with the perceived need to '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; Holec, 1981: 3). In other words, as presented by Holec, the concept of learner autonomy has political roots and political implications. But it also has implications for the way in which learning takes place and the kind of knowledge that is acquired. If the learner himself determines the objectives 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). Note that Holec's use of the verb 'construct' refers to explicit rather than implicit processes, learner initiative and control rather than the unconscious and involuntary workings of cognition. Yet his formulation invites us to ask whether there may be a link between learner autonomy and constructivist theories of learning.

In the conclusion to his report, Holec envisaged two kinds of future educational situation. One would be self-directed and would presuppose learner autonomy. It would provide 'a large and assorted body of informants of all kinds, both human and technical, and … a technological infrastructure capable of temporarily making up for deficiencies in individual technological means' (Holec, 1981: 25). The other situation would be 'that of learners who are not yet autonomous but are involved in the process of acquiring the ability to assume responsibility for their learning' (Holec, 1981: 25). These situations are reflected in the two dominant functions of self-access language learning centres, to provide self-instructional courses and to support traditional teacher-led programmes.

I encouraged our language departments to exploit our new language laboratories in the latter way, and secured a research grant that enabled me to set up a small-scale experiment in self-instructional language learning modelled on the procedures developed by CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues, Université de Nancy II) and described in Holec's report (Holec, 1981: 30–2). Our

self-instructional programme in German for students of engineering ran from 1982 to 1984. The programme was extra-curricular and participation was voluntary. The core learning materials were the various components of the *BBC German Kit* (Sprankling 1979), a self-instructional package in print and audio derived from the BBC's television and radio course *Kontakte*. In addition, we provided pedagogical and authentic materials relevant to the different branches of engineering. Following CRAPEL's example, we set up an advisory service designed to help students to determine their objectives, define contents and progressions, select methods and techniques, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes (cf. Holec, 1981: 3). We also organized occasional meetings between our students and native speakers of German (mostly visiting students from German universities).

Of the 106 students who originally enrolled, nine completed the two-year programme; and in the final assessment all of them showed that they had learned a lot of German and were able to put it to some communicative use (Little and Grant, 1984, 1986). But several large questions remained at least partly unanswered. To what extent had our engineering students become autonomous learners in Holec's sense, and not merely assiduous users of the *BBC German Kit* and the other pedagogical materials we made available to them? Had they shown themselves able to 'construct and control' their own knowledge? Were their regular sessions with the adviser really any different from individual tutorials? And given the ineluctably dialogic nature of oral communication, to what extent is it possible to develop spontaneous oral proficiency by working on one's own in a language laboratory? At this point our research funding ran out. Fortunately my next encounter with learner autonomy quickly began to suggest answers to my questions.

Learner autonomy in the language classroom: from practice to theory

At the end of the 1970s a small group of second and third-level language teachers began to meet regularly under the auspices of Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (Linguistics Institute of Ireland) in order to discuss the implications of the communicative approach for language teaching in Ireland. Using the categories of the Council of Europe's *Threshold Level* (van Ek, 1975), we drafted an outline syllabus for second-level schools and set about developing communicative learning materials. In 1983 we published *Salut!*, a French course for the first

three years of secondary schooling. Such was its commercial success that over the next few years we could afford to invite language teaching specialists from many different countries to come to Dublin and share their experience and expertise with our project group.

In 1984 Leni Dam spent a day telling us how she developed learner autonomy in her English classes in a middle school not far from Copenhagen. She showed us learner journals, classroom posters, and a video of her learners working together in small groups. Three things made an immediate impression: her learners' fluency in English, the fact that they chose rather traditional learning activities, and the collaborative dynamic of the classroom. By Dam's account (see also Dam, 1995) her learners were willing to learn because she made them share responsibility for setting targets, selecting activities and materials, and evaluating outcomes. Their communicative proficiency developed spontaneously because from the first she required them to use English as the medium of their learning, including the reflective processes of target setting and evaluation. In this way the content of their learning was fully implicated in the development of their autonomy, the scope of which was partly determined by what they could do in English. The fact that they chose traditional-seeming activities (especially translation, which was under a dark cloud in the 1980s) clearly didn't matter as long as they engaged with them fully – and communicatively. The powerful collaborative ethos of Dam's classroom showed that learner autonomy was more than a capacity for individual self-instruction: each learner's developing ability to take charge of her own learning enabled her to contribute more effectively to the collective learning effort of the project group or class.

Dam drew much of her inspiration from Douglas Barnes's seminal book *From Communication to Curriculum* (1976), which distinguishes between 'school knowledge' and 'action knowledge' (the knowledge we acquire informally and often unconsciously by virtue of being alive and involved in our environment). For Barnes the key educational challenge was to find ways of bringing learners' action knowledge into fruitful interaction with school knowledge, and his response was based on a constructivist understanding of learning derived from the work of Piaget and Bruner and George Kelly's (1963) psychology of personal constructs (Barnes, 1976: 22–4). As we have seen, for Holec knowledge is constructed by the learner's conscious initiatives (1981: 21). For Barnes and his mentors on the other hand, the notion of knowledge construction refers not to the learner's conscious intentions and initiatives but to largely unconscious cognitive processes. According to this

view, *all* learning is a matter of 'creative construction', necessarily shaped and constrained by what the learner already knows. From this it follows that *all* learning is necessarily autonomous in the sense that it is ultimately proof against external intervention and control, and pedagogy's task is to find a classroom dynamic that responds appropriately to this fact. Holec's definition of learner autonomy remains valid, but its justification now rests on the argument that when learners take charge of their own learning they develop a motivational and metacognitive orientation that facilitates the (internal, unconscious) construction of knowledge. If we promote learner autonomy simply as a way of organizing learning, it becomes a 'method' that can be abandoned if it is judged not to work; we thus expose it to the fate that befell communicative language teaching. But if we believe in learner autonomy because it represents the very essence of good (efficient and effective) learning, we have no alternative but to persist in our search for teaching approaches that enable learners to develop the capacity to assume responsibility for their own learning, even as they develop proficiency in their target language.

These considerations gradually led me to the conclusion that success in language teaching is governed by three principles (Little, 1999, 2001a). The principle of *learner involvement* entails that learners are brought to engage with their learning and take responsibility for key decisions; the principle of *learner reflection* entails that they are taught to think critically about the process and content of their learning; and the principle of *appropriate target language use* entails that the target language is the chief medium of teaching and learning – because language use plays a key role in language learning, autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin, the scope of each constraining the other. This view had two consequences. First, it meant that self-access and distance language learning based entirely on the use of technology could not promise a great deal until the advent of computer-mediated communication made it possible to build learning programmes on new forms of reciprocal communication. This happened, of course, with the advent of e-mail and the Internet (see, for example, Little and Brammerts, 1996; Schwienhorst, 1998; Little, 2001b; O'Rourke, 2002) and with the development of more powerfully interactive systems (Toogood and Pemberton, this volume). Secondly, it required an approach to teacher education that would give intending teachers the experience of being an autonomous learner and enable them to apply the same reflective processes to their teaching as autonomous learners apply to their learn-

ing (Little, 1995). There have been some highly encouraging initiatives in this domain, notably by Flavia Vieira (1999a, this volume) and Leni Dam (2003). But still the question remains, shall we ever be able to develop learner and teacher autonomy as mass phenomena? Recent work by the Council of Europe suggests that a positive answer to this question may not be entirely out of the question.

The European Language Portfolio: learner autonomy on a continental scale?

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has three obligatory components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. The language passport summarizes the owner's linguistic identity and her experience of learning and using L2s; it also allows her periodically to record her self-assessment of overall L2 proficiency. The language biography accompanies the ongoing processes of learning and using L2s and engaging with the cultures associated with them. It supports goal setting and self-assessment in relation to specific learning objectives and encourages reflection on learning styles, strategies and intercultural experience. Sometimes this reflection is a matter of filling in a form or recording one's thoughts under a series of headings; sometimes it is entirely open. The dossier is where the owner collects evidence of her L2 proficiency and intercultural experience; it may also be used to store work in progress. Instead of developing a single version of the ELP, the Council of Europe has defined its key features in a series of *Principles and Guidelines* (Council of Europe, 2000a; version with explanatory notes, Council of Europe, 2004, <www.coe.int/portfolio>) and established a Validation Committee to accredit ELPs that conform to the *Principles and Guidelines* (for further information on the ELP, see Little, 2002).

The Council of Europe intends that the ELP should serve complementary pedagogical and reporting functions. On the one hand, it is designed to make the language learning process more transparent to learners and to foster the development of learner autonomy; on the other hand, it cumulatively provides concrete evidence of the owner's L2 proficiency and intercultural experience. Both functions make use of the common proficiency levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001; for more information, see Little, 2006). The so-called self-assessment grid (Council of Europe, 2001: 26–7) provides the overall scale against which communicative proficiency is recorded in the language passport, while the

CEFR's illustrative scales yield checklists of 'I can' descriptors that support goal setting and self-assessment in the language biography.

Since 1999 I have been involved in the design and implementation of five ELPs, for secondary language learners, university students, learners of English as a second language in Irish primary and post-primary schools, and adult refugees learning the language of their host community. In each case the ELP clearly supports the development of learner autonomy when it is assigned a central role in the teaching–learning process (see, for example, Ushioda and Ridley, 2002; Little and Lazenby Simpson, 2004a, 2004b; Sisamakis, 2006; Little, 2007). This is hardly surprising, given that the ELP is explicitly designed to facilitate the planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning. Less expected perhaps is the impact the ELP can have on teachers, especially in settings where it is central to the teaching–learning process. One such setting is Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT; <www.iilt.ie>), which is funded by the Irish government to provide intensive English language courses for adults with refugee status.

The development of learner autonomy is one of IILT's key goals, for three reasons. First, in addition to attending classes for twenty hours per week, we require our students to do ten hours of self-access learning and homework; secondly, we want to give them language learning skills that they can apply to the continuing development of their English after they leave IILT; and thirdly, we believe that autonomous learners are motivated, focused and successful learners. Accordingly all IILT's courses are based on an analysis of students' communicative needs, where 'communicative' includes the social, cultural and political dimensions and implications of language use. As individual needs are negotiated and clarified, group needs begin to emerge. Some of these are relevant to the class as a whole – for example, all students seeking employment need to know how to interpret their pay slip; while others are more satisfactorily dealt with by dividing the class into sub-groups – for example, not all students need to focus on the same domain of employment. This approach means that there can be no pre-established learning goals, no single set of learning materials (certainly no textbooks), and no fixed pedagogical procedures. Instead, students and teachers use the Milestone ELP (<www.eu-milestone.de>) as their basic resource, to identify learning targets, guide the choice of learning materials and activities, reflect on language learning and language use, and capture learning progress. Because each learner's ELP provides a detailed record of his or her learning progress, teachers have been challenged to think about their teaching in relation to individual

learning processes and trajectories; and because we have created a framework in which teachers are expected to exchange ideas and materials and help one another to solve problems of teaching and learning, the ELP has also turned out to be a significant catalyst in the development of teacher autonomy as a matter of institutional culture (for more detailed discussion and examples, see Little, 2007).

Reconstructing autonomy

Over the past thirty years my understanding of learner autonomy as a theoretical construct has developed and (I hope) matured under the impact of practical experience and reflection on that experience. To begin with, I assumed that learner autonomy was a synonym for self-instruction, but a two-year experiment left major questions unanswered. Reflection on the success of Leni Dam's learners quickly led me to the view that learner autonomy is a great deal more than self-instruction. It also suggested that the inescapably dialogic nature of language and learning demands a theory of autonomy that includes teachers as well as learners and stimulates new approaches to teacher development. In the last few years, with the introduction of the ELP on a large scale, we have acquired a tool that has shown itself to be capable of supporting the development of learner but also teacher autonomy on a large scale (by the summer of 2006 some 80 models had been validated for use in 25 countries and four international networks; for details visit <www.coe.int/portfolio>). This is not to say, of course, that wherever we find the ELP we also find autonomous learners and teachers. On the contrary, it is all too likely that unless the introduction of the ELP is appropriately embedded, it will sink without trace. Nevertheless, its very existence has brought the idea of learner autonomy into the European mainstream with a vengeance, while at the same time arousing a great deal of interest and a certain amount of imitation outside Europe. It is thus not entirely fanciful to see the ELP as a stimulus to further practitioner-driven reconstruction of autonomy in language education.

The parts of this book draw us into the three areas of practice and research on which the successful implementation of learner autonomy depends – learner and teacher development, classroom practice, and the development of self-access materials and systems; and they do so with inspiring variety and richness. Every contribution assumes Holec's original definition of learner autonomy, 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. At the same time, in one way or another, every

contribution acknowledges two further fundamentals: the essential role played by interactive processes in the development of learner autonomy, and the fact that at every turn the pursuit of autonomy in language learning may carry us beyond the immediate purpose and context of learning. This is a measure of the degree of unity in diversity that research in autonomy in language education has achieved; and it is perhaps all the more remarkable given the extent of its international reach. For one whose first encounter with learner autonomy occurred in relation to self-access learning, it is oddly comforting to be reminded (in the contributions by Akaranithi and Panlay; Darasawang, Singhasiri and Keyuravong; Young, Hafner and Fisher; Toogood and Pemberton) that self-access systems in Asia face the same challenges now as self-access systems in Europe did thirty years ago. But it is also comforting to recognize the amount of progress that has been made in the intervening years.

Since it was first introduced to the world of language learning and teaching, the concept of learner autonomy has been associated with Western democratic traditions. This connection is alive and well in Maria Alfredo Moreira's chapter: 'democratic transformation in the classroom is achieved through a shared struggle to promote students' autonomy as learners, and, in the process, increase the democratic nature of the teaching and learning process'. Views of this kind have sometimes provoked the argument that learner autonomy is inappropriate to non-Western educational systems. But to this there have always been two responses: first, learner autonomy is appropriate to *any* educational system that seeks to promote critical thinking and reflective learning (witness the chapters by Hugh Nicoll and Huijuan Shao and Zongjie Wu); and secondly, it is a matter of self-interest for societies to develop the learning skills of their citizens – as Akara Akaranithi and Suriyan Panlay remind us in their chapter, 'to keep up, we cannot wait for someone to tell us what to do'.

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that work on learner autonomy has been characterized by a shuttling back and forth between practice and theory. If this process is to continue, the reconstructions offered here should sow the seeds of further reconstructions. I conclude by mentioning three recurrent features of this book that seem to me to herald important work in the future. The first has to do with self-assessment. In the literature on learner autonomy there is a general assumption that evaluation is the pivot on which learner autonomy turns (Dam, 1995: 49). In one form or another, this assumption is present in every chapter, though only one (by Teija Natri) is

explicitly concerned with self-assessment. The constraints imposed by tests and examinations have long been recognized as one of the greatest systemic obstacles to the successful pursuit of language learner autonomy on a large scale. The ELP offers one way of connecting self-assessment to tests and examinations, via the common proficiency levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001). No doubt non-European contexts like those represented in this book need to find their own way of moving towards an assessment culture that explicitly values learner autonomy by accommodating self-assessment and other learner evidence alongside the results of assessment by teachers and exam boards.

The second recurring feature is the use that several chapters (for example, those by Leena Karlsson and Felicity Kjisik; Rebecca Oxford, Meng Yaru, Zhou Yalun, Sung Jiyeun and Rashi Jain; Mike Nix) make of autobiographical narrative as a way of tapping into individual learners' language learning experience as it intersects with their belief systems and self-concepts. This technique is an essential antidote to the stereotyping tendency ('the learner') that so much theory is prone to, including learner autonomy theory. But when learner narratives are spoken or written in the target language, we are reminded of the powerful contribution that reflective narrative can make to language learning. Research that explores such narratives should help us to understand how to help learners to derive maximum learning benefit from them.

The third recurring feature has to do with the development of autonomous teachers as a precondition for the development of autonomous learners. As Flávia Vieira reminds us, if we seek merely to transmit our theoretical perspectives to teachers we betray our constructivist principles; our duty is rather to empower teachers to develop and enact their own theories. The experience reported by Peter Brown, Richard Smith and Ema Ushioda warns us that this is not necessarily a straightforward and trouble-free process; on the other hand, Judith Kennedy and Annamaria Pinter show that teacher autonomy can arise spontaneously from the exploratory processes of collaborative project work. But the message from all three chapters is clear: like every other aspect of autonomy in language education treated in this book, teacher development depends on a never-ending process of reconstruction as theory is adapted to context, tested in practice, refined, and reconstructed through interaction with the wider language learning and teaching community.