Autonomy in Language Learning

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What is autonomy?

This is probably the single most difficult question to answer about autonomy in language learning and any answer to it is likely to be subjective.

To me autonomy is about people taking more control over their lives - individually and collectively. Autonomy in learning is about people taking more control over their learning in classrooms and outside them and autonomy in language learning about people taking more control over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways in which they learn them.

Autonomy can also be described as a capacity to take charge of, or take responsibility for, or control over your own learning. From this point of view, autonomy involves abilities and attitudes that people possess, and can develop to various degrees. There are different points of view, though, on what these abilities and attitudes are (and even whether abilities and attitudes are the right words!). There are also different points of view on whether or not autonomy also involves a 'situational' element (i.e., the freedom to exercise control over your own learning). These differences explain why it is so difficult to explain exactly what autonomy is.

Related terms

There are a number of terms related to autonomy that can be distinguished from it in various ways. Most people now agree that autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms of 'self-instruction', 'self-access', 'self-study', 'self-education', 'out-of-class learning' or 'distance learning'. These terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by yourself, whereas autonomy refers to abilities and attitudes (or whatever we think the a capacity to control your own learning consists of). The point is, then, that learning by yourself is not the same thing as having the capacity to learn by yourself. Also, autonomous learners may well be better than others at learning by themselves (hence the connection), but they do not necessarily have to learn by themselves. Over the last few years, for example, more and more research is coming out on autonomy in the classroom and 'teacher autonomy'.

The terms 'independent learning' and 'self-directed learning' also refer to ways of learning by yourself. But these terms are very often used as synonyms for autonomy. When you come across any of these terms, it is a good idea to check what the writer means by them exactly!
Reading about autonomy

The links below lead to entries in the longer bibliography on this web site. I am afraid that I am not able to provide copies of any of these titles. If the title of an entry is hyper-linked, you should be able to find the full-text on the web. If the name of the publisher is hyper-linked, you should be able to find more details on how to get hold of a copy. If there is no hyperlink at all, I am afraid you are on your own!


Related areas

Autonomy is also associated with several other areas of research and practice in second language learning. Below, I have tried to emphasise work that connects these areas to the theory and practice of autonomy.

Dam (1994) is an excellent introduction to autonomy in the classroom (see also Benson, 2003). Breen & Littlejohn's (2000) collection of papers is useful starting point on negotiated learning. Voller (1997) is a good introductory paper on the role of the teacher in autonomous learning and Sinclair, et al. (2000) has several papers on teacher autonomy.

Learner training and strategy training have been described as methods of developing the skills learners need for autonomy. Wenden, 1991, Dickinson (1992) and Cohen (1998) are good general introductions to these closely related fields. More recently there has been much discussion of the role of learner beliefs in strategy use and autonomy - see papers in Wenden's (1999) collection. For a recent interesting clash of views on the idea of 'learner development', see Wenden (2002) and Palfreyman (2003).

Self-access generally involves setting up some kind of resource centre in which language learners can work freely. If you are setting up a self-access centre, Gardner & Miller (1999) is essential reading. Papers by Sheerin (1997) and Sturtridge (1997) and the collection of papers by Esch (1994) are also highly recommended. On connections between computer-assisted language learning and autonomy, see Kenning (1996) and Healy (1999).
Bibliography

This bibliography contains around 1000 entries on autonomy and independence in learning and on related subjects such as learning strategies and learner training, self-access and out-of-class learning, and learner beliefs. If you are looking for a shorter list of readings on autonomy and independence, try the What is autonomy? page on this web site.

You can add new items to this bibliography yourself. These will be added to the new entries page automatically, and I will move them into the main bibliography as soon as I can.

Most of the books and papers here should be available through university libraries. Where I can, I have also included links to online papers and ordering sources. Unfortunately, I am not able to supply copies of any of material in this bibliography. So please don't ask!

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Bruce, N. (1995) 'Practising what we preach: creating the conditions for student autonomy'. Hong Kong Papers in Linguistics & Language Teaching, 18, 73-88.


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Camillieri, A. (1999) 'Learner Autonomy in Modern Language Learning: Find your bearing and pick your way.' Rowan University Centre for the Advancement of Learning.


Carton F. (1984) 'Systèmes "autonomisants" d'apprentissage de langues'. Mélanges Pédagogiques 15, Université de Nancy 2: CRAPEL.


Convery, A. (2003)'Managing differentiation in the modern languages classroom.' In M. Jiménez Raya & T. Lamb (eds) *Differentiation in the Modern Languages Classroom.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.


[This paper reflects on the experience of designing an "elective" course within an intensive EAP programme and attempts to identify the principles underpinning the course design elements which aimed to foster learner autonomy.]


[This paper reports on a study of the self access language learning of a group of learners enrolled on an intensive English proficiency course. The study sought to investigate learners' perceptions of SALL, and their actual behaviour in a SALL environment. The data revealed that the learners held positive attitudes to SALL, and made good use of the resources. However findings also suggested that more proficient learners tended to use the SALL opportunities less often, and identified a number of obstacles to SALL. If you have difficulty find TESOLANZ, contact the authors at hayo@hayo.nl]


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Cultural background and self-assessment tendencies in an ESL classroom'. In V. Bickley, et al. (ed.) Language Teaching and Learning Styles within and across Cultures. Hong Kong: Institute of Education.


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Holec, H. (1990) 'Qu'est-ce qu'apprendre à apprendre?'. *Mélanges Pédagogiques*, 20, 75-87. Université de Nancy 2: CRAPEL.


This paper analysis the different elements involved in learning how to learn.


Jor, G.C.K. (1995) 'Self-instructional materials development at the Independent Learning Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong'. Occasional Papers in English Language Teaching (English Language Teaching Unit, The Chinese University of Hong Kong), 5, 59-72.


[Includes learner awareness issues and focus on learning styles and strategies]

[How to be a better language learner. Chapters include information about learning styles, learning strategies, memory and memory strategies, anxiety and affective variables, testing, study abroad.]


Languages Provision in Higher Education. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching, pp. 30-43.


[This book presents a unique insight into teaching and learning foreign languages at second level and will be of interest to teachers, teacher trainers and educational planners in Ireland and beyond. The book reports the findings of an Irish research-and-development project whose purpose was to explore
ways of making post-primary foreign language learners more autonomous. It begins by considering learner autonomy first as a practical achievement and then as a theoretical construct. It goes on to explain how the project was organized, presents the quantitative data collected in the early stages, and uses qualitative data to explore what the project meant to the teachers and learners involved. It concludes by summarizing the different perspectives on learner autonomy brought to the project by experienced practitioners and researchers from Denmark, Germany, Finland, Norway and Spain.


[Aimed at relatively inexperienced, secondary school teachers. Also relevant to mainstream EFL and applicable to modern languages.]


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Rubin, J. (1975) 'What the "good language learner" can teach us'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9, 41-51.


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