

Postscript: Implications for Language Education

Richard C. Smith

Introduction

As editors, David Palfreyman and I began our invitation to contributors with the following statement of assumptions: "Learner autonomy has become an influential concept in language education in a variety of contexts in recent years, and 'culture' has often been mentioned as a significant variable in connection with its appropriateness and/or practicality." In order to encourage a move beyond the national/ethnic stereotyping of learners which has tended to characterize discussions in this area to date (see Introduction), we made a deliberate attempt to solicit diverse perspectives from a variety of contexts, encouraging contributions relating to "national, institutional, small group or other types of culture". As a starting point, we invited contributors to consider some or all of the following questions: "1. What might learner autonomy mean in the context of a particular culture?; 2. Should/Can learner autonomy be enhanced in that culture?; 3. If so, how?"

In this short postscript I hope to avoid imposing a false unity on the diversity of views contributed by chapter authors. Instead, I want to offer a further springboard for reflection and action by revisiting answers to our initial questions, with a particular focus on possible implications for language teachers and teacher educators. With this focus in mind, I shall consider, in turn, the availability of different "Meanings of autonomy", the implications of "Culture as resource" and "Culture as constraint", and new priorities in asserting "Autonomy as a value".

Meanings of autonomy

One of our initial questions to contributors was “What might learner autonomy mean in the context of a particular culture?” A variety of answers are offered in the preceding chapters, and a clear, though potentially discomfiting implication is that autonomy is a multifaceted concept, susceptible to a variety of interpretations. Holec’s (1981: 3) definition of learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (with which the Introduction to this book begins) retains its validity as a common reference point; however, there are different emphases available regarding what “ability to take charge” entails, and different views, also, of what an individual’s “own” learning might mean when learning is viewed as inevitably occurring within the constraints and with the resources of particular sociocultural contexts.

With reference to this first point – that “ability to take charge” can be differentially interpreted – one implication for language educators and teacher educators seems to be that we should resist reduction to, for example, technical *or* psychological *or* political interpretations, instead remaining open to different possible sources of insight for practice (cf. Oxford’s plea, in this volume). For purely practical purposes, teachers may need to be aware that different ‘versions’ of autonomy are in circulation, and learn to identify the biases within them. Such biases might include, for example, over-technical emphases on the power of self-access, distance learning and/or ICT alone to develop autonomy; the limitations of ‘psychological’ awareness-raising approaches which place responsibility on learners but which fail to acknowledge mechanisms of control *over* learners; and, perhaps, the way ‘political’ versions can underestimate learners’ needs for authoritative information and guidance. Palfreyman’s chapter shows that different interpretations of autonomy can circulate within the same ‘organizational culture’, and it seems that some versions can serve managerial more than learners’ or teachers’ interests. Indeed, as Holliday indicates most clearly, our own particular professional discourses of autonomy can blind us to actual instances of autonomous learning behaviour. It seems important, then, to keep an open mind and be aware of the strengths of different approaches but critical at the same time of attempts to reduce or co-opt learner autonomy to overly narrow interpretations of what “ability to take charge” entails.

In relation to the second point above – that the contents, processes and meaning of individuals’ “own” learning will vary according to sociocultural context – this book offers a particularly rich source of

insights for educators. From Riley's overview of differences in concepts of 'self' and 'personhood' across cultures to Toohey and Norton's in-depth investigation of individual struggles to access and make use of local social 'affordances', the overall message seems clear: that individuals' control over their own learning can only be developed in ways which are relevant to *them*, and always in relation to and under the influence of particular background and new cultures. I shall consider these issues from the point of view of practice in the following two sections before returning to the question of 'meanings' of autonomy in the final section.

Culture as resource

Our second and third questions in relation to diverse learning contexts were "Should/Can learner autonomy be enhanced?", and "If so, how?" Accounts in this collection reveal how differently learners can perceive learning for their own purposes in different contexts (cf. Benson, Chik and Lim, and Gao), and show also that the material and psychological resources they draw upon as well as the constraints they face are likely to vary according to setting. Such variations explain why there cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to developing autonomy across cultures, as is emphasized by several contributors. Learners' background cultures have often been seen as a hindrance to the development of autonomy, a view which has been associated with claims for some contexts that promoting autonomy is a form of Western cultural imperialism (see Introduction). However, the overall message which emerges from this collection is a more positive one – that promoting autonomy can be both viewed as appropriate and made feasible in a wide variety of settings, so long as what students already know and want is seen not as a hindrance but as a major resource.

It seems clear that both the appropriateness and the feasibility of promoting autonomy depend very largely on degree of 'fit' of the teacher's conceptions with those of students (cf. Holliday and Clemente for examples of *lack* of fit). One way for educators to avoid *inappropriate* imposition on students has already been suggested above, that is, being self-critical with regard to one's own professional preconceptions and becoming aware of different interpretations from those one has 'inherited' as a teacher. Holliday suggests this need most strongly as a means to avoid cultural imperialism, while Smith shows how, in practice, teachers can develop new conceptions *through* interventions which set out to investigate and utilize students' existing 'social autonomy'. In this

connection, many of the research approaches which have been used by chapter authors to access learner perspectives could be adapted by teachers in their own practice. These include uses of narrative (Benson, Chik and Lim, and Aoki), interview (Gao, Toohey and Norton, Palfreyman, Clemente, Aoki), learner diaries (Toohey and Norton), ethnographic observation (Toohey and Norton, Smith, Fonseca), more structured observation (Vieira), learning logs (Schwienhorst), reflective writing (Smith, Vieira) and conversation groups (Aoki). These approaches to investigation can (as illustrated particularly in the accounts by Benson, Chik and Lim, Smith, Schwienhorst, Vieira and Aoki) serve at the same time as effective means for developing students' ability to reflect on and take greater metacognitive control of their learning.

Teachers might be encouraged to get to know better how their own students can or could learn for themselves, in their own 'spaces of freedom', by accounts such as those by Benson, Chik and Lim, Gao, and Toohey and Norton, which reveal that learners can find value in various resources that teachers themselves may be unaware of. As practitioner accounts in this collection also make clear, developing autonomy in ways which are meaningful to learners may, then, need to involve a dialectic between the investigation and use of existing resources and the development of access to appropriate new resources. Thus, Fonseca shows how, even in a 'resource-poor' environment, building on what *is* available (in this case, including learners' affective needs for enjoyment, and their love of songs and performance) can combine with new input and ideas of autonomy to productive effect. Using learners' ideas for classroom work (what 'fits' with their own priorities), and increasing their control over resource selection can be similarly productive (cf. Smith).

Even in the 'resource-rich' settings of self-access centres and computer-based learning which are often associated with the idea of autonomy, building on and enhancing the creativity students themselves bring might need to be seen as a key priority, and Schwienhorst shows both how learners can be creative within the constraints of a MOO environment and how new tools can be developed in the service of learners, not of the technology. Finally, a particularly successful strategy for developing 'individual' autonomy, as emphasized by authors in several settings (e.g. Smith, Fonseca, Schwienhorst), is collaboration among learners. Here, too, learners' 'background' culture – in this case relating, surely, to universal needs for meaningful relationships with others – can be seen as a usable resource, not a constraint.

Culture as constraint

Despite the above, there is a need to consider seriously constraints on the development and/or exercise of learner autonomy, specifically within educational settings, but also in wider social situations (cf. Toohey and Norton). As several contributors make clear (for example, Smith, Fonseca, Vieira), the promotion of learner autonomy is by no means a generally established goal in practice in their teaching contexts, and, paradoxically, when it does become established in name (or under names such as 'learner independence'), certain professional and institutional conceptions and practices connected with it can be seen to actually hinder its development. Indeed, whether autonomy 'should' and 'can' be promoted in a particular context may depend largely on the conception of autonomy and type of approach adopted (Holliday, Smith).

Interestingly, then, *professional* and *organizational* cultures emerge more strongly than 'national', 'ethnic' or *learner* cultures as significant constraints on the appropriateness and feasibility of promoting autonomy. Needs for critical self-awareness on the part of teachers have already been sufficiently emphasized above, in the light of the fact that teachers' 'ideological baggage' can get in the way of developing students' 'own' autonomy: impositions of power can continue under the cloak of developing learner autonomy, and here we need to be careful not only about culturism (Holliday) but also sexism and other '-isms' and the degree to which our own preferred ways of knowing can have a negative impact on some learners (Aoki). There may also be needs for teachers to develop a critical awareness of the way (discourses within) organizational cultures (Palfreyman) can limit our freedom to act for the benefit of students. There seem to be clear requirements for (teacher education for) 'teacher autonomy' in these respects, and both Vieira and Aoki offer constructive suggestions. Just as one resource for the development of learner autonomy has emerged as collaboration among learners (cf. 'Culture as resource' above), negotiation of meaning and collaboration among colleagues in our own institution and/or between different institutions emerge from both Vieira's and Aoki's accounts as particularly salient. Collaboration can enhance our own autonomy as teachers in the face of constraints, helping us to identify ways to utilise existing opportunities as well as construct new resources for learner development and our development as teachers.

Autonomy as a value

While there are undoubtedly dangers in the imposition on learners of 'culturist' conceptions and approaches connected with autonomy, denying its validity for learners from particular backgrounds may involve equally culturist assumptions (Benson, Chik and Lim; Holliday). Indeed, the voices of learners consulted in the writing of several chapters in this collection remind us that there *are* – from their points of view – serious needs for developing learner autonomy across cultures.

Finally, then, I would like to draw attention to the way a fuller and deeper picture of needs for learner autonomy can be seen to emerge from this collection's emphasis on cases of learning in sociocultural context. The three opening chapters show particularly clearly, it seems to me, the degree and extent to which developing an ability to take charge of learning can be significant from learners' own perspectives – and we should remind ourselves that learner voices are usually excluded from our professional discussions. Clearly, not all language learners in the world are involved or likely to be involved in literally 'crossing borders' in the way Chik and Lim, the Chinese students in Gao's account, and Eva in Toohey and Norton's all are or have been. However, such learners can provide us with deep insights into facets of learner autonomy which may have been neglected in the past (cf. Smith, 1996). Among these, I would stress the implication, firstly, that individual language learners, from 'East', 'West', 'North' or 'South', do have their own voices – have the ability to reflect on and express their own views about what and how they are learning, though these voices are often denied or only partially accessed. When the relatively free expression of these voices is encouraged, as frequently in this collection, we can learn at least the following:

1. Language learning (and the learning of teaching; cf. Aoki's chapter) involves the whole 'person', not just particular (e.g. cognitive) aspects of the person in separation from other (including affective) dimensions;
2. One reason for this is that language learning inevitably involves, indeed in many ways 'is' culture learning, particularly when people are (or are likely to be) 'immersed' in a new culture;
- 3 This involves transformations of identity which can be stressful as well as liberating; changes of perception regarding one's 'background' culture and newly experienced cultures; and actual changes in relationships with people in these cultures;

4. It is also clear that contexts, as well as identities, are in a state of flux – cultures are changing. New resources for language learning are becoming available in many contexts, within and outside institutions; increasingly, people may move from culture to culture over the course of their lives;
5. In a world of change, learners in various contexts can and do exercise agency and resourcefulness in making use of/creating resources for their own learning purposes, although access to such resources can also be denied;
6. Gaining further control over the above processes (that is, over transformations in emotional relation to language-and-culture learning, overall identity transformation, changing relationships to others and changing opportunities for learning) can be seen as deeply significant by the people concerned, in relation to their lives.

These insights lead me to end with a final suggestion, that in future more emphasis may need to be placed not only on what autonomy *is* for different learners in different settings but also on what it is *for* – that is, what aspects of language learning or more general learning we associate it with and why. Learners' accounts of what is significant for them might recall us to why we became educators in the first place, potentially implying fresh needs for us to see beyond the acquisition of language system and skills in our current conceptions equally of language learning and of learner autonomy. We might decide, for example, to recognize more than we have tended to do in the past the importance of language teaching *as education*, involving ideas of developing 'voice', agency and self-esteem in general, engaging 'the whole person' and – specifically in our field – guiding students across cultural boundaries, intellectually, imaginatively and affectively as well as literally. Within language education, autonomy deserves to be associated more consistently with these important areas, in particular, perhaps – given the contents of this collection and the historical context of its production (cf. Preface) – with the notion of cross-cultural understanding. In reasserting our values as language *educators*, maybe we can become better attuned to the interests and needs of learners – and better able to develop their autonomy in areas of deep significance to us *as well as* them.