Learner autonomy

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Introduction

Since its introduction into the field of language teaching in the 1970s, interest in learner autonomy has grown rapidly. This chapter outlines the evolution of definitions of autonomy and its history in language teaching research and practice. Issues of particular interest to ELT are highlighted – conceptions of autonomy in the context of the global spread of ELT, relationships between autonomy and the development of identity in language learning, and the status of autonomy in ‘postmethod pedagogies’. The terms of persistent debates on the roles of teaching, assessment and individuality are also discussed.

Definitions of autonomy in language learning

Among the many definitions of learner autonomy in the literature, Holec’s (1981: 3) “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” remains the most widely cited. Describing this ability in terms of planning, monitoring and evaluation, Holec essentially explained what autonomous language learners are able to do. Later, Little (1991: 4) shifted the emphasis from learning behaviour to the psychology of learning by describing autonomy as a capacity for “detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action”. Later still, Benson (2001: 47) defined autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” and identified a variety of dimensions of control over language learning under three headings: the day-to-day management of learning, the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition, and decisions about learning content. These definitions all acknowledge that autonomy is multidimensional, not “a single, easily described behaviour” or a “steady state” (Little, 1990: 7), and that it takes different forms according to the learner and the object and context of learning. In ELT, autonomy is likely to take very different forms among, for example, young learners in a primary classroom in Asia, EAP students in a university classroom in the United Kingdom or adult learners studying English outside the classroom in South America. In each case, individual differences (see MacIntyre, Gregersen and Clément, this volume) related to learners’ goals and purposes, prior experiences and predispositions toward language learning will also come into play.

Other definitions of learner autonomy have additionally emphasised its social dimensions. Jiménez Raya et al. (2007: 1) describe the autonomous learner as “self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware”, while Murray (2014: 4) makes the point that “individuals can
only be autonomous in relation to some social context”. In ELT, social context could mean a number of things. We might think, for example, of ELT itself as a broad social context for learner autonomy, of the narrower contexts of regions or educational settings, of the social contexts of specific classrooms or of the social ecologies in which particular individuals learn languages and live their lives (van Lier, 2004; Palfreyman, 2014).

There is also an important situational aspect to learner autonomy. From the teacher’s point of view, autonomy is not so much a matter of teaching autonomous learning skills but of creating an environment in which learner autonomy can be exercised and enhanced. Teachers who orient their teaching towards autonomy create conditions in which students make meaningful choices about their learning and produce diverse and personally relevant learning outcomes. Viewed in this way, autonomy might be understood as a conceptual toolkit for teachers to use in decision making at a variety of levels, ranging from curriculum design to minute-by-minute practice in the classroom. At each level, we might ask who makes the decisions about student learning and whether our choices as teachers help or hinder the development of learner autonomy.

Autonomy is viewed as an attribute that is worth developing for several reasons. Although learner autonomy is not exactly a theory, it does have a theoretical basis in the idea that language learning is more effective when students are more involved in decision-making about their own learning. Little (1994: 431) argues that “all genuinely successful learning is in the end autonomous”, although we should bear in mind that “successful”, in this context, implies not only a certain level of proficiency but also personal relevance and a capacity to use a foreign language for purposes that are recognisably the learner’s own. According to Macaro (2008: 59–60), autonomy implies “taking control not only of the language being learnt, but also of the goal and purpose of that learning”, and it resides in “being able to say what you want to say rather than producing the language of others”. Autonomy has also been shown to be at the root of language learning motivation, which is enhanced when students are enabled to make choices and decisions about their learning (Ushioda, 2011; see also Lamb, this volume).

A brief history of learner autonomy

Starting points for the history of autonomy in ELT can be found in the 1970s in the experimental work of Henri Holec and his colleagues at the Centre de Recherches et d’Applications on Langues (CRAPÉL) in France and Leni Dam and her colleagues in Danish secondary schools (Dam, 1995; Smith, 2008). Subsequent work has followed parallel paths inside and outside the classroom. At the CRAPÉL, innovative work focused on opportunities for self-directed adult language learning using authentic materials in the ‘Sound and Video Library’. Learners used the library with the guidance of ‘counsellors’ who engaged learners in self-directed processes of ‘learner training’ (Holec, 1980). From these beginnings evolved a range of practices involving self-access (Gardner and Miller, 1999), language advising (Ludwig and Mynard, 2013) and learning strategies (Cohen and Macaro, 2008; see also MacIntyre, Gregersen and Clément, this volume). Learner autonomy has also played a similar role in relation to distance language learning (White, 2003), tandem learning (Lewis and Walker, 2003), self-instruction (Fernández-Toro, 1999) and computer-mediated language learning (Lamy and Hampel, 2007; see Gruba, Hinkelman, and Cárdenas-Claro, this volume).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the emphasis in work on learner autonomy fell outside the classroom, for example, on how learners exercised autonomy in self-study. Although autonomy was also the focus of classroom work, it was not until Little (1991) and Dam (1995) that classroom autonomy became an important theme. Dam (1995) provided a detailed account of how
learners were given a considerable share of the responsibility for planning and carrying out activities in Danish ELT classrooms. Classroom-based experiments elsewhere introduced the process and negotiated syllabus (Breen and Littlejohn, 2000), in which the content and methods of learning were either determined by the students or negotiated between students and teachers, and collaborative learning (Nunan, 1992; Ribé and Vidal, 1993), in which teaching and learning focused on independent project work carried out in groups. In these classroom contexts, the concept of autonomy lent meaning to a variety of practices that emphasised learner choice and decision-making.

The paths of out-of-class and classroom autonomy have seldom been far apart and frequently cross. Research on autonomy in language learning tends to be practice-driven (Little, 2007; Smith, 2008). In addition to journal papers and postgraduate theses, collections of papers from conferences, symposia and workshops that bring together practitioners from a variety of teaching and learning contexts are prominent in the dissemination of research (e.g. Morrison, 2011; Murray et al., 2011; Irie and Stewart, 2011; Barfield and Alvaro, 2013; Murray, 2014). In these collections, autonomy often plays the role of the theoretical ‘glue’ that holds together the diverse areas of practice mentioned above within a shared matrix of assumptions on the benefits of learners taking more active roles in decision making inside and beyond the classroom. While interest in autonomy stretches across languages, the majority of studies are now ELT based. The impact of this is difficult to assess, but it is clear that the ELT industry has facilitated both the internationalisation and what is sometimes perceived as the ‘mainstreaming’ of interest in autonomy (Pennycook, 1997). Whether autonomy has truly become a mainstream ELT concept is open to question, however. Little (2007), for example, suggests that interest in autonomy among researchers is not widely reflected in the practice of mainstream language education. Borg and Al-Busaidi’s (2012) study of teachers’ beliefs about autonomy, on the other hand, suggests that the concept is now deeply embedded in the professional consciousness of the ELT community.

Main current issues in the theory and practice of learner autonomy in ELT

Thinking about the nature of language learner autonomy has developed considerably over the past three decades or so. Three main current issues stand out that are largely inspired by thinking on autonomy from the perspective of ELT: conceptions of autonomy in the context of the globalisation of ELT, relationships between autonomy and the development of learners’ identities, and the status of the concept of autonomy in postmethod pedagogies.

Autonomy and the globalisation of ELT

The rapid growth of ELT from the 1960s up to the present day has been both a consequence of and a factor in globalisation. The expansion of foreign travel for business, education and pleasure and the growth of global information technology and media networks has created both a demand for English and conditions that facilitate its acquisition, but the ELT industry has also helped speed these developments (Edge, 2006; Graddol, 2006; Phillipson, 2012; see Pennycook, this volume). The same is true of national education policies, which are increasingly subject to forces of convergence, leading to shared policies focusing on the individual as a resource in the struggle to maintain a competitive edge in the global ‘knowledge economy’. In educational policy around the world, English language competence is now part of a ‘generic skill’ set tied up with communication, information technology and lifelong learning skills, which leads to English language education policies that often favour approaches focused on communication, information technology and autonomous learning skills.
Miliander and Trebbi (2008) have gathered data on language education policies favouring autonomy in seven European countries from Norway to Bulgaria. Studies have also documented policies involving autonomy in China (Shao and Wu, 2007), Thailand (Akaranthi and Punlay, 2007) and Japan (Head, 2006). These policies have kept alive the debate, initiated by Riley (1988), around the extent to which the idea of learner autonomy is essentially ‘European’ in character, which has largely focused on the ‘appropriateness’ of practices associated with autonomy in non–European education systems (Smith, 2001; Sonaiya, 2002; Holliday, 2005). Further critiques from Chinese researchers have tended to target communicative language teaching (see Thornbury, this volume). These critiques draw on similar arguments to those that were earlier directed at learner autonomy (e.g. Hu, 2002; Yu, 2012), the essential point being that ELT methods that are constructed as being ‘progressive’ in comparison to ‘traditional’ Chinese approaches may be culturally and ideologically inappropriate to local settings.

Thus, in a broader critique, Holliday (2005) sees autonomy as a central construct in dominant ELT discourses that oppose the ‘active’ Western student to the ‘passive’ non–Western ‘Other’. Schmenk (2005) also critiques the alignment of the idea of autonomy with globalisation. According to this critique, wider interest in learner autonomy in language learning can be explained by its presence in global education policies and its promotion by the ELT industry. It is important, however, to untangle the internationalisation of autonomy in language teaching and learning ‘on the ground’ from these higher-level global processes. The rise of autonomy could be seen as a product of (problematic) ‘top-down’ processes of globalisation, yet as Smith (2008) points out, international interest in the practice of autonomy has evolved largely through ‘bottom-up’ processes involving networks of practitioners who often pursue autonomy as a minority interest in the systems in which they work.

It is also important to separate critique of the principles of learner autonomy from the forms in which it often appears through top–down, policy–driven approaches. For example, Sonaiya (2002) interprets the introduction of CALL (computer–assisted language learning) in place of classroom teaching in Nigeria as an initiative intended to facilitate learner autonomy, yet this top–down development appears to have done little to encourage learner decision making or control over learning. Valuable theoretical work that is attempting to develop culturally appropriate accounts of autonomy is being carried out by, for example, Wu (2011) who has explored roots for the broad idea of autonomy in learning in Confucian scholarship, and Huang (2013), who has carried out ethnographic work in a Chinese provincial university that teases out the relationship between ELT students’ aspirations for autonomy and their expectations of community and care within the institution. Kuchah and Smith (2011) have explored the potential for autonomy in what they call the ‘difficult circumstances’ of large and low–resourced ELT classrooms in Africa. Kuchah devised pragmatic solutions to teaching in crowded classes of 200 or more which included teaching outdoors, negotiated rules and work plans, and creative writing as a response to the lack of textbooks (see also Shamim and Kuchah, this volume).

**Autonomy and identity in ELT**

The global spread of English is also leading some researchers to rethink the meaning of learner autonomy in the context of ELT. In an important contribution to the literature, Illés (2012) notes two developments affecting English language learners around the world – the growing role of English as a Lingua Franca (see Seargeant, this volume) and the role of English in computer–mediated communication (CMC; see Kern, Ware and Warschauer, this volume) – that are leading to a shift in emphasis from language learning to language use. The task of ELT, Illés argues, is to “help learners develop self-reliance and autonomy, which will help them to communicate
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 Successfully in international settings” (p. 506). In the new contexts of English language use, “learners can be considered autonomous only if they can meet the increased problem-solving demands the use of English in international and CMC settings presents” (p. 512). For Illés, this also implies a shift of emphasis in the definition of learner autonomy away from control of teaching and learning processes (which is best left to the pedagogical expertise of teachers) to control over language use. This is a challenging view from the perspective of ELT, which accords, for example, with new ways of looking at motivation that are similarly inspired by considerations of motivations to learn English as an international language (Ushioda, 2006; see also Lamb, this volume). It also accords with Littlewood’s (1996: 81) model of autonomy, which identified “autonomy as a communicator” as an intermediate stage between “autonomy as a learner” and “autonomy as a person”. From this perspective, the significance of autonomy in language learning lies in its impact on the learners’ capacity to exercise personal autonomy in their lives through communication in a second language.

Much of the most interesting research on learner autonomy at present is taking place around the intersections of autonomy, identity and motivation and is largely inspired by thinking about the potential of ELT to enhance international mobility and change individual lives (Murray et al., 2011; Ushioda, 2011; Benson and Cooker, 2013). Recent research that links autonomy to issues of identity calls attention to ways in which learning a new language involves acquiring and experiencing new identities that may, in turn, contribute to the learner’s personal autonomy. This research also links to motivation, especially where motivation is understood in terms of the ‘ideal L2 self’, or learners’ imaginings of who they might become as users of a foreign language (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; see also Lamb, this volume). From a practical perspective, ELT practitioners are encouraged to pay attention to the impact of learning English on the lives and identities of learners and the ways in which autonomy in their language learning is connected to autonomy in their lives (Benson, 2012).

Autonomy and postmethod pedagogy

Kumaravadivelu (2003) argues that the days in which researchers searched for the best ‘methods’ of teaching languages are long gone and that we now live in a ‘postmethod’ era in which language pedagogy is informed by ‘macrostrategies’, among which autonomy is one (see also Hall, this volume, ch. 15). It has long been emphasised that autonomy is not a ‘method’ of teaching or learning but a matter of encouraging learners to play a role in deciding what the most appropriate methods will be both in and out of the classroom. In its earlier incarnations, autonomy most often appeared as the goal of experimental approaches, where it was often as important as the goal of actually learning the language, if not more so. In more recent work, autonomy tends to be subordinated to language learning goals in approaches in which it is one, but not necessarily the most important, consideration in the planning of language courses or lessons. As a consequence, autonomy is no longer seen as a ‘specialist’ concern, and there are now sections on autonomy in language teaching overviews by, for example, Harmer (2001), Hedge (2000), Cameron (2001), Nation (2001), and Thornbury (2005). From this perspective, autonomy might be seen not as an overarching goal for ELT but as one of a number of elements around which postmethod language pedagogies might be built.

At the same time, the term ‘pedagogy for autonomy’ has emerged to refer to the various ways in which the idea of autonomy might be built into the practice of language education (Smith, 2003). This term implies teaching for the purpose of developing autonomy, but it is also understood that pedagogies for autonomy can be “weak” or “strong” (Smith, 2003), “narrow” or “broad” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), or “gradualist” or “radical” (Allford and Pachler, 2007). For
Allford and Pachler (2007), gradualist approaches treat autonomy as a long-term goal to be achieved through the acquisition of autonomous learning skills, while radical versions emphasise learners’ right to autonomy. For Smith (2003), weak pedagogies for autonomy assume that learners lack autonomy and need training towards it, while strong pedagogies begin from the assumption that learners are already autonomous to some degree. Ribé (2003) also makes a distinction between ‘convergence’ models of autonomy directed at shared, ‘other-directed’ curriculum goals and ‘divergence’ models which involve choices “affecting almost all levels of control, management and strategic decisions”.

Although these are theoretical distinctions, they highlight a number of practical pedagogical questions. Is learner autonomy to be a course goal, or does it inform teaching within a course that has other objectives? Is the aim to develop learner autonomy or to build on the autonomy the students already have? Are the learners working towards a shared, externally defined goal such as an examination or towards individual targets and outcomes? The answers to these kinds of questions will determine whether a ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ approach is most appropriate and whether it is to be adopted at the level of course planning or day-to-day teaching.

Key debates about autonomy

Throughout the history of research and practice on learner autonomy, three persistent and unresolved issues have provoked discussion and debate: the roles of teachers and of assessment and the ‘individualistic’ character of autonomy.

Do autonomous learners need teachers?

A persistent question for debate is whether or not learner autonomy means, or at least implies, learning without a teacher or instructional materials, as it has sometimes been defined (e.g. Dickinson, 1987). Although this is now seen as a poor definition, it is also understood that autonomous language learners should, in principle, be capable of directing their own learning. One problem with this view is the suggestion that a second language can be learned, implicitly or naturalistically, in much the same way as a first language, whereas it is now clear that first language acquisition sets up barriers to naturalistic second language learning later in life that can only be overcome through explicit learning (Ellis, 2008). In light of this, it may be more accurate to say that autonomous language learners should be capable of self-directing whatever instructional, self-instructional or conscious learning processes prove necessary to their learning. This view does not preclude a role for teachers and teaching. At the same time, research and practice on learner autonomy has often explored modes of learning that involve alternatives to classroom instruction.

On the other hand, there is a school of research and practice on learner autonomy that values teachers and teaching and sees autonomy operating and developing mainly in language classrooms. This perspective has tended to focus on alternatives to direct instruction that give students more control over teaching and learning processes in the classroom. It has also focused on the qualities of teachers and, in particular, the notions of teacher autonomy and teacher education for learner autonomy (Benson and Huang, 2008; Smith and Vieira, 2009). The premise of much of this work is that in order to help students develop learner autonomy, teachers must be autonomous in respect to their own learning, professional practice and development and the exercise of discretion in the classroom.

In evaluating the role of teaching in the development of learner autonomy, it is perhaps important to bear in mind that teachers are apt to think of learner autonomy as something
that depends on their actions rather than those of the students (Benson, 2008). At the same time, the trend for institutions to reduce the costs of ELT mean that any initiative that promises both learner autonomy and reduced expenditure on classroom teaching is likely to be welcomed. Thus, ELT practitioners need to be wary of simply providing an educational rationale for cost-cutting measures in the form of arguments for learner autonomy. The best way to approach this issue may be from the perspective of what learners need to do in order to learn a foreign language. The current state of research suggests that both explicit instruction and self-directed learning outside the classroom are needed for learners who achieve high levels of proficiency (Benson, 2011). This suggests the value of an approach to learner autonomy that attends both to classroom and out-of-class learning, which is reflected in recent work that has explored language learning beyond the classroom and how teachers can attend to it (Benson and Reinders, 2011; Nunan and Richards, 2015).

**Does assessment have a role to play in autonomous learning?**

From one perspective, there is considerable antipathy between the concepts of autonomy and language assessment, especially where the stakes in testing are high. While autonomy is associated with diverse learning outcomes and heterogeneity, assessment systems often aim at convergent outcomes and homogeneity (see Fulcher and Owen, this volume, for further discussion of language testing and assessment). In mass education systems, washback effects of external assessments are often the main constraint on teacher and learner autonomy as teachers are forced to ‘teach to the test’. Arguably, the potential for autonomy is greatest where external assessment regimes are weak and assessment is internally managed, although several studies have argued that students are capable of exercising autonomy in preparing for public assessments such as IELTS (Barrett-Lennard, 1997; Morrison, 2011). Among international assessment tools, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and European Language Portfolio (ELP) have been seen as particularly conducive to autonomy because of their open-endedness and use of self-assessment procedures (Little, 2005; Kühn and Pérez Cavana, 2012). In this context, Little has argued, from a Vygotskian perspective, for the value of external assessment as a stage leading to the internalisation of capacities for self-assessment. Nevertheless, there has been a preference in the field of autonomy for localised formative assessment, and self- and peer-assessment especially (Everhard, 2015). Localised assessment is seen as a means by which autonomous learners reflect on their plans and adjust them according to internal and external feedback (Dam and Legenhausen, 2010).

Another side to this problem concerns the place of assessment of autonomy in language teaching and learning. Arguably, learner autonomy is a means to the end of better language learning and does not need to be assessed independently of language proficiency, although the fact that we often talk of students ‘developing’ autonomy or becoming ‘more autonomous’ begs the question of the measurable criteria that might lie behind such statements. Benson (2010) argued that autonomy is potentially measurable in terms of degrees of control over a variety of dimensions of learning but that such measurements can only be approximate, due to the large number and contextual variability of the dimensions involved. Everhard and Murphy’s (2015) recent collection on assessment and autonomy includes three proposals for the measurement of autonomy. Here, Murase (2015) describes a questionnaire instrument designed for self-assessment of autonomy along ‘technical’, ‘psychological’, ‘socio-cultural’, and ‘political-philosophical’ dimensions. Tassinari (2015) proposes a qualitative assessment model based on dynamic relationships among competencies and skills identified in the learner autonomy literature. And Cooker (2015) proposes a self-assessment process, conceived as “assessment as learning”, that enables
learners to align themselves with one of six modes of autonomy. While the practical purposes of assessing autonomy may be questioned, the authors claim that their models have value as diagnostic and self-development tools.

**Is autonomy individualistic?**

One of the more persistent charges levelled against the concept of autonomy is its focus on the individual, which has recently been discussed from a variety of theoretical perspectives in Benson and Cooker’s (2013) and Murray’s (2014) edited collections on the individual and social dimensions of autonomy in language learning. This question was first tackled in the 1980s, as advocates of autonomy sought to extricate the term from its associations with ‘individualisation’ (Brookes and Grundy, 1988) and ‘self-instruction’ (Dickinson, 1987). Thus, once the preferred term in ELT, ‘learner independence’ has also now largely been replaced by ‘learner autonomy’ as the view that autonomy implies ‘interdependence’, rather than ‘independence’, has come to the fore (for example, the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language [IATEFL] Learner Independence Special Interest Group [SIG] changed its name to the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG in the mid-2000s). Little (1994) argued this view from a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective (see Negueruela-Azarola and García, this volume) and later researchers have drawn on, for example, theories of “community” (Murray, 2011), “sociality” (Lewis, 2013) or “social ecology” (Palfreyman, 2014).

In spite of an insistence that autonomy is a social construct, the tension between the individual and social sides of autonomy remains and has been the object of recent critiques from the direction of social theory. Critics tend to associate autonomy with Cartesian conceptions of the self-determining mind and often prefer to use the term ‘agency’ to denote a culturally conditioned, socially mediated and constrained capacity for individual action (Lantolf, 2013). For many advocates of learner autonomy, this view of agency is consistent with their own views of autonomy as a social construct, yet the concept of learner autonomy ultimately rests on the assumption of an individual ‘self’ that is capable of making its own decisions about learning, albeit in interaction or conjunction with others. The strongest challenge to this assumption comes from research on ‘social cognition’ (Hamilton, 2005), which goes beyond the idea of self-determining individuals acting in concert to the idea that individual cognition itself, including our sense of self and individual agency, emerges from and is dependent on the social interactions that we are engaged in over the course of our lives (Shook, 2013). This view is increasingly supported by neuroscience research that fails to find evidence of physical structures in the brain that correspond to everyday conceptions of the autonomous self and calls into question whether individual minds are, in fact, separate from the minds of others (Iacoboni, 2008; Lakoff, 2013).

In practical terms, a social conception of learner autonomy entails a recognition that language learning depends on interaction, which might lead to a preference for group work, collaboration, and out-of-class activities that bring learners together in communication with other learners. At the same time, it seems important that a social view of autonomy retains a focus on individual differences, the diversity of experiences and purposes that individuals bring to language learning, the value of divergent learning outcomes, and the contribution of experiences of second language learning to the unique identities of individual learners. Benson (2013) argues that if the focus on the individual were removed from learner autonomy, its distinctive contribution to language pedagogy would be diminished. At the same time, we need to evolve a view of individual language learners, both in theory and practice, that attends to the social contexts of their learning as more than background information and foregrounds their individuality within frameworks of social conditioning, interaction and mediation.
Future developments

The debates around the nature of learner autonomy and its roles in the practice of language teaching and learning are likely to continue into the future. This chapter concludes with comments on two emerging issues that are likely to feed into these debates: the roles of language learning beyond the classroom and some implications of neuroscience research for the concept of autonomy in learning.

After a period in the 1990s and 2000s in which it was somewhat marginalised, there has recently been something of a resurgence of interest in language learning beyond the classroom (Benson and Reinders, 2011; Nunan and Richards, 2015). This interest is prompted in part by new digital contexts for language learning and awareness that learners who previously lacked access to out-of-class opportunities to learn English now find abundant opportunities through online media and social networking services (Lamy and Zorou, 2013). Renewed interest in language learning beyond the classroom is also prompted by increased mobility and, in particular, the opportunities for a closer integration of language learning and everyday life afforded by mobile, hand-held devices. In research on language learning beyond the classroom, there also appears to a significant shift from the provision of opportunities and resources to an understanding of how learners make use of the opportunities and resources available in their everyday environments. In a discussion of language learning skills for a ‘mobile world’, Kukulska-Hulme (2013: 5) argues for a shift from the design of language learning programmes based on transmission pedagogies to a learner-centred view of mobile devices as “personal tools that can also support self-directed forms of language learning and greater learner autonomy”. These developments are likely to have a significant effect on research and practice on learner autonomy. Interest in autonomy in classrooms developed because teachers sought to make autonomy relevant to learners who mainly learned languages in classrooms. The imperative in the future, however, may well be for ELT practitioners to adapt classroom teaching to their learners’ autonomous learning outside the classroom.

On a somewhat different note, we may also expect research on autonomy in language learning to be challenged by neuroscience research, which is already having an impact on research in fields such as ‘neurosociology’ (Franks and Turner, 2013), ‘neuroeconomics’ (Camerer et al., 2005) and ‘neurolinguistics’ (McGroarty, 2008). The idea of learner autonomy rests, fundamentally, on the assumption that human beings possess cognitive capacities that allow them to control learning behaviour through planning and reflection. Research on neural systems in the brain, however, is increasingly calling this assumption into question (Camerer et al., 2005). It suggests, for example, that the mental processes that account for much of our behaviour, and language processing in particular, are automatised and inaccessible to introspection. Moreover, we are apt to exaggerate the importance of controlled, conscious behaviour because introspective access to such cognitively controlled processes is much stronger than access to automated processes, which take place below the level of conscious awareness. Neuroscience research also points to the interaction of emotion and cognition in decision-making, showing that cognition is insufficient in itself to cause action without the support of emotion processes, which often overwhelm it. Lastly, there is some evidence that, because it draws resources from the regions of the brain that are responsible for cognition, conscious reflection on decision making may actually diminish control over behaviour. In other words, people who reflect upon and give reasons for their decisions do not necessarily make better decisions. While neuroscience at present stands at some remove from research on autonomy in learning, it deserves attention for what it might tell us about the limits of control, and hence autonomy, over language learning.
Conclusion

Given the many different ways in which learners can go about learning a second language and the many different outcomes they may achieve, research and practice on learner autonomy offers a set of ideas about language learning and approaches to language learning that promise satisfactory outcomes for individual learners. Autonomy is associated with better learning and, more importantly, with personally relevant outcomes. In indicating some of the key issues in its development in the field of language teaching and learning, this chapter has attempted to show both the flexibility and adaptability of the concept, related debates and concerns, and the openness of its advocates to new ideas and new practices.

Discussion questions

• What is the role of teaching in the development of learner autonomy? How should teachers incorporate out-of-class learning into teaching for learner autonomy?
• Does language proficiency assessment help or hinder the development of autonomy? Is there a purpose to the assessment of learner autonomy itself?
• Does learner autonomy imply an excessive concern with individuality in language learning? What do you understand by a ‘social’ approach to autonomy?
• To what extent do you agree or disagree with the view that autonomy is an essentially ‘European’ or ‘Western’ concept?

Related topics

Appropriate methodology; Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Educational perspectives on ELT; Individual differences; Method, methods and methodology; New technologies, blended learning and the ‘flipped classroom’; Politics, power relationships and ELT; Sociocultural theory and the language classroom; World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca.

Further reading

Everhard, C. J. and Murphy, L. (eds) (2015) Assessment and autonomy in language learning. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (This collection of papers is the first in the field to thoroughly discuss the question of how to assess autonomy.)
Murray, G. (ed.) (2014) Social dimensions of autonomy in language learning. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (This collection of papers by experts in the field discusses the social aspects of autonomy from a variety of theoretical points of view.)

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