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The pedigree of learner autonomy

by Peter Lahiff (Future Learning**)**

The pedigree of learner autonomy Learner autonomy is one of those phrases that is so familiar that we assume it has always been part of our vocabulary as teachers. We we do look for origins we don't look much further than the French educationalist Henri Holec, taking his 1981 publication, Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning, to be the founding text. In this essay Holec succinctly defines learner autonomy as being about taking charge of ones own learning (1981, p. 3). To start with Holec, however, is to overlook the pedigree of an idea that was being widely discussed by educationalists before 1980. This article will look at the strands of thought that informed Holec's concise formulation of the concept and will go on to explore what the idea actually means in practice.

The pedigree of learner autotomy goes back long before the CEFR

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Like most proposals for a more liberal approach to education, learner autonomy owes a debt to John Dewey, who spoke about providing the child “with the instruments of effective self-direction” (Dewey, 1915, p. 28). Although he never used the term, commentators on Dewey have no doubt that what he was proposing amounted to an autonomy which, “required that individuals 'know' what they are choosing and that they 'choose freely' ” (Savage, 2002, p. 38). Dewey’s concept of education is notable for perceiving learning as essentially communal and as something that happened in the context of a school community. This contrasts with the independent exploration of the child's surroundings described by Piaget in the 1920s (Beins, 2011), a distinction which was important to the development of the concept of learner autonomy. The importance of learning as a social process was also emphasised by Piaget’s contemporary Lev Vygotsky who saw guidance and collaboration as essential for the type of learning which leads to development (1978, p. 86). As he was working in the Soviet Union, Vygotsky’s ideas only became part of the conversation in the west about the time that Holec was formulating his (Yanitsky, 2011, p. 110).

Another conceptual grandparent is Abraham Maslow. His contribution was a theory of human motivation which proposed that the drive in each person to realize their potential, which he called self-actualization, was an essential motivating force (1943). There is a strong echo in this of Dewey’s earlier call for self-realization to be made the ultimate goal of education (1893). Maslow went on to develop his idea in Motivation and Personality (1954) which gave autonomy as one of the characteristics of self-actualization, although , like Piaget, he defines it as developing independently of others, rather than in collaboration with them. A second edition of this work came out in 1970 by which time the term he had coined, self-actualization, was part of the popular discourse.

These conceptual grandparents, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Maslow informed a discussion in the 1970s which saw autonomy go from being a psychological term to an educational value. Richard Stanley Peters, who was instrumental in establishing the philosophy of education as a discipline, applied Maslow’s language to Dewey’s ideas about education, which he saw as advocating, “considerable choice for children in what and when and how they learn - all with the goal of fostering the autonomous, independent, ‘self-actualizing’ behaviour in young children.” (Peters, 1969). This formed the philosophical basis for Charles Rathbone's open education project which was influential in both the United States and the United Kingdom and which advocated, “viewing the child as an autonomous agent who directs much of his own learning” (1971, p. 114).

Two publications in 1970 had given the movement for educational form a radical push; Deschooling by Ivan Illich and Criticial Pedagogy by Paolo Freire. Illich saw schools as institutions which could not be reformed because, “the creature whom schools need as client has neither the autonomy nor the motivation to grow on his own” (1970, p. 70). His solution was to create resources which the learner could access autonomously. Here the term has more of the meaning of learning independently of others. For Freire, in contrast, the overtly political objective was to turn schools into instruments which would free the oppressed and bring about a change in society. "[Exercising] freedom would require them to eject this image [of slavery] and replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (1970, p. 47).

The concept of learner autonomy was introduced into language teaching as part of the process which culminated in the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio.

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Their development began in 1972 when former Belgan Minister of Education Henri Janne was asked to formulate the principles of an education policy for the European Community. His principal collaborator in this was Bernard Schwartz, a leader in the adult education sector in France. In 1976 they jointly published The Development of Permanent Education in Europe, a manifesto for what we now call lifelong learning. This educational project sought to move beyond the idea that education is a preparation for work and view it instead as an ongoing process which aimed to foster autonomy, responsibility and participant democracy (Schwartz, 1976, p. 17).

"la capacité de prendre en charge son propre apprentissage … the capacity to take charge of one's own learning"

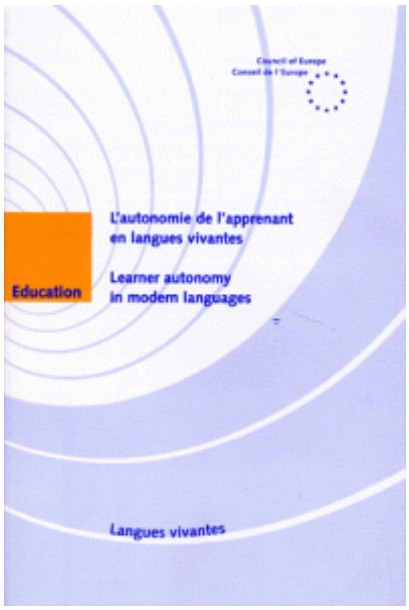
Holec originally formulated his ideas about learner autonomy for the Council of Europe in 1979 in direct response to the call from these two educational technocrats. He was also cognisant, as he tells us in a footnote, of the ideas of Illich and Freire (1979, p. 1). On the same page he quotes Janne from a 1977 paper on adult education which declares it a means of awakening the conscience and of emancipation. Sounding very like Freire, Janne goes on to talk about the sense of responsibility that must be developed in tandem with autonomy. Janne and Schwartz are talking about a general sense of autonomy that the latter defines as the capacity to take on responsibility for your own affairs (Holec, 1979, p. 3). Holec adapts this to the field of education as "la capacité de prendre en charge son propre apprentissage" - translated from the original as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning.

Having given us this pithy definition, Holec goes on to elaborate that autonomy in this field means assuming responsibility for decisions concerning all aspects of learning. He breaks this down into five areas and maintains that the autonomous learner is capable of making all these decisions about the learning he wishes to be involved in. These five areas are; determining the objectives of learning, defining its contents and progression, selecting the methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures of acquisition (their pace, time, place etc.), and evaluating what has been acquired as a result.

There has been much written about what learner autonomy is and is not. It's meanings range from auto-didacticism, to learning skills, to an innate capacity, to an exercise in responsibility and even extending to a right to self-determination (Benson & Voller, 1997,p. 2). David Little who has written extensively on the topic sees it as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (1991, p. 4). While Little sees autonomy as an innate feature of our psychology which is not much prone to development through training, other commentators feel that it is at least partly learned through educational experiences (Candy, 1991, p. 115). The argument for putting learner autonomy into practice is that, because it makes learning activities more personal and more focused on individual needs, it makes learning more effective. Allied to this, because it involves reflecting on what has been learned and how it has been learned, learners become more resilient and more able to overcome temporary setbacks. In the case of language learning it has the additional benefit of providing authentic practice in the spontaneous social use of the learned language when it is the medium of instruction.

The pioneering practitioner in the area of autonomous language learning is Leni Dam, a teacher of English and Mathematics in a Danish comprehensive school where she took the first steps towards implementing learner autonomy with her 14-year-old, mixed ability class in 1973. Dam emphasised the importance of the learners' willingness and capacity to control or oversee their own learning (1990). Dam together with Lienhard Legenhausen showed over the course of a decade that autonomous language learning works better than the mainstream approach in developing vocabulary (1996). Legenhausen went on to demonstrate in three separate studies arising out this work that it was also more effective in the development of grammatical structure, and conversational interactions, as well as showing a positive impact on learner behaviour and attitudes (Legenhausen 1999a,b,c). Dam's approach involved teaching through the medium of English, gradually developing a set of autonomous learning activities, ongoing evaluation of learning (including self-assessment) and learner reflection on that.

In 1991 an intergovernmental conference of the Council of Europe recommended the creation of a "common instrument allowing individuals who so desire to maintain a record of the different elements of their language learning achievement and experience, formal and informal" (Council of Europe, 1992, p. 37) and a European Language Portfolio, which was to be a record of these different formal and informal elements (Council of Europe, 1992, p. 39). Both the European Language Portfolio and Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which it is based on, were launched in 2001. In the almost 15 years since it was published the CEFR has gained wide acceptance from publishers, private language schools and testing organisations and, more slowly, in the public education system at second and third levels. The complementary, European Language Portfolio was designed with the principles of learner autonomy in mind. It



The original French publication of Henric Holec's formulation of learner autonomy in 1979

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was to be both a way to demonstrate what had been achieved in a language and a means for learners to reflect on their learning. The editors of Perspectives from the European Language Portfolio state in their introduction that it “has challenged the traditional pedagogical model for language learning and teaching: the role of learners and teachers in learner-centred pedagogy, the concept of language proficiency - which is defined by competences - and the fundamental role of self-assessment” (Bärbel Kühn & María Luisa Pérez Cavana, 2012). They may be confusing impact with potential, however, because, despite having been adopted it at a policy level, it yet to make a major impact in the classroom, unlike the CEFR.

Learner autonomy has been advocated by educational reformers in one way or another for well over a century and it is a value that most educators would find it hard to disagree with in principle. Many teachers implement aspects of it in their practice, including choice or creation of course content and student-selection of learning activities. Despite this its proven potential impact on student motivation and language learning outcomes that has yet to be realised. Knowing how the concept developed should, hopefully, refresh the understanding of a familiar term and empower teachers to adapt it to their purposes and implement it more effectively.

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