Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching: New Research Agendas

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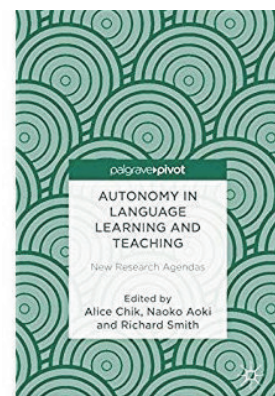**Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching: New Research Agendas**

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If the title of this edited volume of 6 Chapters (Chapter 1 the Introduction) suggests proximity of its concerns to the theme of this issue of *LLT* – informal language learning by adults, its subtitle "New Research Agendas" is perhaps portentous of its departures from that theme. Exploring the "who, what, when, where and why" of learner autonomy (Introduction, p. 2), the book takes us into "contextual constraints" (Chapter 3), "group processes" (Chapter 4), "digital practices" (Chapter 5), and "human geography and mediated discourse analysis" (Chapter 6). Chapters 3 and 4 deal with formal learning contexts. Nevertheless, there are connections between its explorations and the concerns in this *LLT*.

Autonomy has been defined as "the capacity to take control of one's learning" (Benson, 2001/2011); individual authors in the book all mention Benson. Part of this phraseology is now made familiar by Brexit sloganeering. The definition's invocation of "capacity" entails presuppositions of incapacities for autonomy: cultural, economic and individual. However, the book begins by convincingly rebutting these

presuppositions, in Chapter 2. This chapter by Smith, Kuchah and Lamb, entitled "Learner Autonomy in Developing Countries", is licenced for open access under the Creative Commons Attribution. Smith et al. argue that given the "difficult circumstances" of teaching in developing countries (West, 1960), "successful language learners ... are autonomous learners who can exploit out-of-school resources" (Abstract, p. 7). Provincial learners in Indonesia "(e)ven at the age of 12-14 ... were able to distance themselves from their school English classes" (and teachers!) (p. 10); mobile phones provided internet access, which brought within their reach dictionaries, language learning websites, and Facebook friendships with foreigners as well as fellow-Indonesians. Referencing Sugata Mitra's well-known "hole-in-the-wall" experiments, these authors set, as a first research priority, studies of out-of-class learning through mobile phones and the internet (see, in this context, the newspaper report in *The Times of India*, Bengaluru, October 11, 2019: https://m.timesofindia.com/india/stuck-on-a-maths-problem-these-social-media-apps-could-help-you/amp_articleshow/71536748.cms).

Smith et al. go even further. Autonomy, they say, is "an essential characteristic of all successful learners and can be found everywhere if we know how to look" (p. 18). It may be missed by "western eyes" because it takes "varied forms" in different settings. Their second research priority is therefore "more research into and sharing of success stories of teaching in low-resource classrooms." Pointing out that "the exchange of educational ideas is ongoing and multidirectional" (p. 15), they tellingly recapitulate how, a little over 200 years ago, a "Madras System" was introduced into the bulging schools of an industrializing Britain ("England was at that time, after all, the epitome of a 'developing country'", p. 16). This system was a form of peer-teaching and collaborative learning built on

a traditional Tamil form of literacy teaching, where a master would instruct older children in how to draw letters and words in sand, and they would then help younger children to write and pronounce them, thereby enabling far more children to learn to read and write than would be otherwise possible.

Finally, and importantly, Smith et al. argue in favour of decolonization of ELT through "a participant-centred approach" to research, with and by learners (Kuchah, 2013; Pinter, Mathew and Smith, 2016), and teachers or teacher associations (a couple of projects from India find mention: AINET, the All-India Network of English Teachers, and Naidu et al. 1992).

Chapter 3 by Gao, which describes the cultural context of teaching English in East Asian countries, finds its echoes in Philip Scott's narrative (this issue) of introducing self-selected free reading in a college in Vietnam, in the face of mass-marketed materials. Gao adopts a current premise that "learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent," not least because "teachers who did not experience autonomy in learning ... are unlikely to support ... autonomous learning" (pp. 30-32). In other words, teachers tend to teach as they were taught. He identifies, from internet discussions in mainland China and Hong Kong (in an online teachers' community, and responses to a query in an article about teachers' errors on an English proficiency test whether teachers are responsible for students' falling language standards), three major constraints on teacher autonomy. These are: bureaucratic control (a tight regime of accountability that subjects teachers' professional standards to external scrutiny), an "educational consumer" culture born out of the "marketization of education", and a cultural tradition that simultaneously deifies teachers and reviles them for perceived failures.

The first and the third constraints are well-known in India, the second (to my mind) less so. British-origin communicative ELT materials here have to find their place amidst a robust public as well as private ELT publication presence. Institutions such as the NCERT and the SCERTs received their impetus in this regard from the pioneering efforts of Makhan Lal Tickoo's Department of Materials Production at the then Central Institute of English (see Tickoo, 2008). As for bureaucratic control and external standards of accountability, this might be an inevitable by-product of the push towards professionalization. Teachers are not unique in this respect. Lawyers and doctors, for example, have workload requirements, and are nevertheless expected to be competent and stay updated in their professions. (Doctors have also emerged in India as victims of the consumerist stance of the patient and their "party".)

But what sets language teachers apart from doctors and other professionals is the nature of language and its acquisition. Knowledge of a language is not the received and codified knowledge of a "subject" such as medicine, law, or physics (Chomsky, 1975). Language acquisition must invoke the "instinctive" growth and automation of mental structures in the individual learner's mind, in a supportive environment (Pinker, 1994). The language teacher's knowledge domain is the capacity to detect and promote the "occurrence of learning" (Prabhu, 1987) in the individual learner, i.e. to invoke ZPD (the Zone of Proximal Development, discussed again below).The teacher has no prescribed and pre-prepared diagnostic/remedial kit for individual learners. This is why the bureaucratic response to learning "failure" of "more of the same" curriculum or methodology is futile (see Philip Scott in this issue).The reflective teacher-practitioner sees this futility. Without autonomy, no language teaching or learning is possible. This is why language teachers gripe about bureaucratic control.

Palfreyman (Chapter 4) finds that curriculum planners and teachers now see autonomy and group/pair work as "key tenets" in language education, and sets out to "understand … how autonomy and groups can work and develop together in practice" (p. 53). Working in a group is a highly valued "soft skill" (p. 55). Collaborative learning has its theoretical underpinnings in the Vygotskian ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), and India's monitor method for Tamil literacy (the "Madras System" referred to in the first chapter). Contra Palfreyman, ZPD does not entail that "learning happens in interaction and is only then internalized" (p. 57); or that "interdependence is… a necessary, initial stage" (p. 59) of scaffolding for self-regulation. Nevertheless, this is a useful discussion of the possibilities and pitfalls afforded by group learning, where "collective intelligence", "community of practice" and "positive interdependence" must balance the negative effects of the "free rider".

Subtypes of positive interdependence are mentioned that appear to be particularly relevant to team sports. Education now has its own team sport, namely school quiz contests. The following example of collaborative preparation for tests may thus be relevant; it may serve also as a healthy counter to the prevailing individualistic culture of an aggressive pursuit of marks. In this example, learners revise as a group for a test they then take individually; "then the score of one of members, chosen at random, is given to all members of the group." On this somewhat startling procedure, students "not only gained higher scores than another group which had worked individually but also had more positive attitudes towards the test and the class" (p. 58). The claim that "peer assistance seems to have benefits in terms of autonomous learning for the provider of help … peer tutors … [feel] more responsible, more motivated, more critically aware and more confident in their own learning and use of English" (p. 60), again rings true.

In Chapter 5 Alice Chik, and in Chapter 6 Murray, return to informal language learning and ethnographic inquiry. Murray presents an account of the learning opportunities afforded by a social learning space for Japanese students of English: an "English Café", created within a large café. Chik's auto/ethnographic account of picking and learning a language from the internet rests on case studies. Her understanding of autonomy returns to just that in Chapter 2: "successful language learners learn and use their target languages both inside and outside the classroom (references omitted)," and "researchers and teachers … need to make stronger connections as to how language learning is situated in the learners' social worlds" (pg. 75). Autonomy is central to CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning), which was initially teacher-initiated, but now stands redefined as "any process in which a learner uses a computer, and, as a result, improves his or her language" (Beatty, 2010, p. 7): for "… daily digital use is almost a given. Language learning is almost incidental" (p. 77).

Chik details learning experiences on Duolingo, which provides structured language lessons through bilingual translation. In an interesting exercise of their autonomy, she and some other Duolingo learners reversed their roles at the end of a course (from English speakers learning Italian, to Italian speakers learning English); they found this to be "the best way to revise and consolidate the newly learned Italian" (p. 86). Autonomy here endorses a good old practice in the grammar-translation method!

Indeed, as Smith et al. observe (Chapter 2, pp.15-16), "'teaching students to learn' is not simply the latest language teaching fashion but can be related to deeper, older educational conceptions and traditions".

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