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Language learner autonomy: Rethinking language teaching

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Introduction

For me, 'language learner autonomy' denotes a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning. From the beginning they do this as far as possible in the target language, which thus becomes a channel of their individual and collaborative agency. By exercising agency in the target language they gradually develop a proficiency that is reflective as well as communicative, and the target language becomes a fully integrated part of their plurilingual repertoire and identity.

I first encountered this dynamic in 1985. Before that, I had been at a loss to say what exactly I should do as a language teacher to help my learners to become spontaneous, confident and fluent users of their target language; now I could see the beginnings of an answer. When I began to engage with the concept of learner autonomy it was a minority interest. In the intervening years it has spawned an extensive literature, much of which has little to do with my own understanding of the concept and the conditions for its successful operationalization.

This article is divided into five sections. In the first, I explain how I came to language learner autonomy; in the second, I describe its characteristic dynamic with reference to young Danish teenagers learning English as a foreign language; in the third, I offer some theoretical reflections on this dynamic; in the fourth I summarize its impact in various educational domains; and in the fifth I briefly consider future prospects.

Two early encounters with learner autonomy

In 1979 I was appointed director of the newly established Centre for Language and Communication Studies (CLCS) at Trinity College Dublin. One of my first tasks was to establish self-access language learning facilities and resources that could be used by members of the college as a whole. While doing so, I came across Henri Holec's 1979 report to the Council of Europe, *Autonomy and foreign language learning* (cited here as Holec, 1981), which introduced me to the concept of the autonomous language learner. Holec was concerned with adult learners whose needs were not met by language courses. Such learners worked individually in a language laboratory, making their own selection from a library of materials, most of which had been designed for use in teacher-led classes. Autonomous language learning in Holec's sense was self-instruction; it did not include a view about how languages are learnt.

As the newly appointed director of CLCS I was supposed to know about language learning and teaching. Embarrassingly, I had no ready answer to the question: How can language teachers help their learners to become fully proficient in their target language – able to listen and read without strain and speak and write spontaneously, fluently and accurately? In other words, what do teachers have to do to ensure that the target language becomes a fully integrated part of their learners' plurilingual capacity and identity? My own experience as a language learner at school and university had been dominated by the grammar–translation method, so I knew at first hand that learning grammatical rules and engaging in endless translation was not the answer. I also knew that the development of oral fluency

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depended crucially on spontaneous target language use. By the time I left school my German was much more fluent than my French because I'd stayed with a German family on three separate occasions, whereas my experience of France was limited to a two-week school visit during which I mostly spoke English with my classmates. By the time I became a university teacher of German, I understood the importance of getting my students to use the target language when engaging orally and in writing with the rich textual diet we served up. But what about language learners at school? The newly arrived communicative approach promised much, but in practice it tended to substitute functions and notions for grammar and vocabulary. I couldn't see how it would help learners to make the transition from highly controlled language learning to spontaneous and authentic language use. I read the applied linguistics research of the day and found work on interlanguage and communication strategies especially illuminating, but it didn't provide me with a principled view of the language teacher's task. That began to change in 1985, when I attended a seminar given by Leni Dam, who taught English to young teenagers in a Danish *Folkeskole*.[1]

Dam preached the gospel of learner autonomy. She used the term with reference to Holec (1981), though her approach had evolved in response to the Danish authorities' commitment to 'differentiation', the provision of learning environments in which all learners could thrive according to their interests and abilities (Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017, p. 6). I thought of autonomous learning as a matter of self-access and self-instruction; it had never occurred to me that you could have learner autonomy in a classroom. The videos Dam showed us and the learner logbooks she passed round confirmed, however, that her young teenage learners were autonomous in Holec's sense: they set their own objectives, selected learning activities and made their own learning materials, monitored progress, and evaluated outcomes (Holec, 1981, p. 3). From my point of view more importantly, Dam's learners were confident and highly proficient users of spoken and written English; they 'had' the language to an extent that I had never encountered before. This epiphany launched me on a search for the answers to two questions: What features of Dam's approach explained her learners' success? And how could those features be captured in general pedagogical principles that would allow this success to be replicated in other contexts, with learners of different ages and at different stages of proficiency development?

The autonomy classroom as a learning community

I began my search for answers to these questions by undertaking a close study of Leni Dam's classroom (for a more detailed version of what follows here, see Little et al., 2017). Dam's mixed-ability learners ranged in age from 10 to 15 (grades 4–9) and their target language was English. At first they had four 45-minute English lessons each week, timetabled as two 90-minute sessions; later the number of lessons was reduced to three, two of which were timetabled together. There were 22–24 students in the class, which was typical of class size in the school as a whole. Other language teachers in the school followed more traditional approaches.

In Dam's classroom English was the preferred medium of communication from the first lesson. Her aim, however, was not to instruct her learners in the usual sense but to draw them into a learning conversation (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) to which they were expected to contribute: sharing the initiative in dialogue is a precondition for autonomy in language learning and language use. Dam's approach meant that learning English and using English were two sides of the same coin. This is less difficult to implement than many teachers suppose: with frequent repetition, learners quickly grasp the essentials of classroom management and master the simple interactive routines required for participation in collaborative activities. It's important to note that the insistence on using English did not imply an attempt to suppress the learners' first language. Danish was central to the identities that Dam wanted to engage in the learning process, the source of her learners' intuitive knowledge of language and communication and the default medium of their consciousness and discursive thinking. Their capacity to interact with one another in English necessarily grew out of their capacity to do so in Danish.

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Also from the first lesson writing supported speaking. To this end Dam used posters – large sheets of paper stuck to the classroom wall – for an almost infinite variety of purposes: to provide her learners with the words and phrases they needed for simple interactive routines; to list possible homework activities; to collect vocabulary on a particular theme; to list the criteria learners agreed should be used to evaluate their efforts to write and speak English; and so on. She also used posters to scaffold learners' reflective engagement with learning. For example, discussing with beginners what they needed to do to become proficient in English, she encouraged them to make suggestions in Danish which she wrote on a poster in English. The learners then copied the English translations into their logbooks – plain exercise books in which they kept a record of each lesson, made a note of new words and phrases as they arose, and wrote the texts they produced individually (collaborative project work was kept in portfolios). English grammar was not explicitly taught. The fact that Dam's learners nevertheless developed the capacity to write grammatically correct English is attributable to the fact that they spent so much time writing English, collaboratively as well as individually, and were always encouraged to strive for orthographic accuracy. This seems to confirm the truth of David Olson's (1991) claim that writing IS metalinguistics.

In most classrooms a textbook communicates curriculum goals to the learners indirectly, in the form of input material, grammatical information and exercises. Dam, however, didn't use a textbook, so at the beginning of each school year she shared and explored the curriculum goals with her learners, using a simplified version with beginners and the relevant pages of the official guidelines with non-beginners. Learners kept a copy of the goals at the back of their logbook so that they could refer to them when reviewing progress. As learning unfolded, Dam and her learners negotiated a 'process syllabus' that supported what Breen (1987, p. 161) identifies as the three interdependent processes of the language classroom: 'communication, learning, and the group process of a classroom community'. As Breen explains (1987, p. 168), a process syllabus has two components: questions concerning the decisions that should be made jointly by teacher and learners, and a bank of procedures, activities and tasks from which a selection is made according to the decisions taken. Effective decision-making is a skill that learners have to acquire. Especially in the early stages, it is the teacher's responsibility to pose the questions, help her learners to arrive at answers, and propose appropriate activities and tasks.

In Dam's classroom, learning involved two kinds of activity, both of them shaped by the learners' interests and thus linked to their life outside the classroom. The first kind focused on bits of language, especially vocabulary. Beginners, for example, made word cards: small pieces of card or paper on which they wrote words they wanted to learn, the English word on one side and its meaning in the form of a picture or the Danish equivalent on the other. In a mixed-ability class, some learners might produce 20 or more word cards in a lesson, while others produced far fewer; by no means all the words they chose were high-frequency. From word cards they progressed to picture dominoes – small pieces of card or paper are divided into two halves; on one half is a picture, drawn by the learner or cut from a magazine, and on the other a phrase or sentence that refers to the picture on another domino. And from picture dominoes they progressed to picture lotto, for which they had to produce longer texts that described the pictures on the lotto boards. In due course, working individually or in groups, learners made board games, which again entailed working on themes of their choice and thus learning language that coincided with their interests. The learning that took place when learners made these materials was reinforced and extended when the materials were used by other members of the class.

The second kind of learning activity involved individual and collaborative text production. For their first homework, for example, beginners wrote a text 'About myself'. Dam wrote a text frame on a poster ('My name is …. I live …. My parents are called …. I have … brothers and … sisters. My hobbies are ….'). The learners then called out in Danish the words and phrases they needed in order to fill out the frame and Dam wrote the English equivalents on another poster. Learners were, of course, free to copy into their logbooks words and phrases others had asked for. Having learners produce texts about themselves as their first written exercise is another way of promoting language learning 'from the inside out', grounding it in the individual learner's identity; it also shows learners that they can

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produce a short text with very limited linguistic resources. Another activity in the same vein is 'Picture + text': learners cut a picture from a magazine, stick it in their logbook, and write a short text about it. If the picture is of another person, they can adapt the text they wrote 'About myself' to describe the person in question. The texts learners produced were read aloud to the class, so they were always writing for an audience they knew. From an early stage Dam's learners also worked in groups of three or four to write short plays that they performed for the rest of the class. The script was gradually negotiated, each learner proposing the lines he or she would speak. The effort to arrive at a script that was coherent and entertaining required intensive negotiation, revision and rehearsal, all of which stimulated concentrated learning.

In Dam's classroom learning proceeded in recursive cycles: planning was followed by implementation, which was followed by evaluation, which fed into the next phase of planning. Beginners might complete a cycle in a single lesson, but as soon as collaborative projects were introduced, learning cycles started to become longer; after a year or two they typically lasted for three or four weeks. Learners recorded their evaluations of the learning process and its outcomes in their logbooks: the usefulness of the activities they had chosen, what they had learnt, how effectively the teacher had helped them, how successfully they had collaborated with their classmates in pairs and small groups, and the new language they had learnt. Introduced, modelled and supported by the teacher and carried out as far as possible in English, in the autonomy classroom evaluation is not an optional extra but a central part of the learning process.

Within cycles of learning, individual lessons followed a fixed structure: teacher's time, learners' time, together time. Teacher's time was used to introduce new activities and ways of working that the learners could take over when they felt ready to do so. At the beginning of a cycle, Dam might draw attention to a particular curriculum requirement; when her learners were working on group projects, she might remind them of the progress reported by the different groups at the end of the previous lesson; and at the end of a cycle, she would use teacher's time to launch an interactive evaluation process. In learners' time, the learners worked on chosen activities or tasks individually, in pairs or in groups. Together time was used for activities that involved the whole class; for example, individual evaluations were shared, decisions regarding homework were made public, and groups reported on the progress of their projects. On occasion, Dam provided some concluding input by reading the class a story or singing a song with them.

It has often been argued that successful implementation of learner autonomy requires a change in the teacher's role, from 'the sage on the stage' to 'the guide on the side' – phrases used by King (1993) to refer to contrasting styles of college teaching. But to describe the change in these terms is seriously misleading because it implies that the teacher steps back and allows her learners to proceed under their own steam, intervening only when she sees that they need help. Nothing could be further from the teaching/learning dynamic we are concerned with here. From the description I have given, it should be clear that the teacher is in control of the class, which depends for its very existence on her linguistic and pedagogical expertise. It is her responsibility to initiate and sustain communication in the target language; and although she wants her learners to make choices and take decisions, it is her responsibility to make sure that they understand where the curriculum goals are meant to lead them, what questions they need to ask in order to take informed decisions, and what kinds of activities and tasks should follow from their decisions. In other words, she must teach her learners reflective habits and the skills of self- and peer-assessment. At the same time, of course, she must monitor the progress of each learner and of the class as a whole. In short, the teacher's job is to create and sustain a community whose language learning is a function of its language use. Whatever their age and level of target language proficiency, when learners enter an autonomy classroom they should enter a discourse world that is partly their creation and whose purpose is to draw their identity into the target language. Such a classroom embodies the definition of language learner autonomy with which I began this article.

The findings of the LAALE project (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment), carried out by Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen in the 1990s, illuminate some

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of the differences between the autonomy classroom and a typical 'communicative' alternative (for a full account of this project, see Little et al., 2017, pp. 121–157). Dam and Legenhausen investigated different dimensions of the proficiency development of one of Dam's classes after seven and fifteen weeks, eighteen months and four years. For purposes of comparison, the same elicitation instruments were used with learners at a German *Gymnasium* who were the same age, started learning English at the same time, and used a popular communicative textbook. Dam's autonomous learners acquired a larger and more diverse vocabulary than their German peers in the early stages, a surer grasp of English grammar in the first eighteen months, and greater pragmatic competence over four years. Even in the artificial situation of data collection, they engaged in authentic conversation – though that is hardly surprising: authentic conversation had been the medium and substance of their language learning from the first lesson.

Language learner autonomy: three pedagogical principles and some theoretical reflections

By the early 1990s it was clear to me that Leni Dam's learners became confident, fluent and accurate users of English because, from the beginning and in writing as well as speech, English was the medium in which they pursued activities that they themselves chose and managed: it was a channel of their agency. The replication of their success in other learning environments would depend, I believed, on the operationalization of three interdependent pedagogical principles derived from Dam's classroom practice: (1) use of the target language, written as well as spoken, for all functions of teaching and learning; (2) learner control, achieved by requiring learners to identify learning targets, choose learning activities and document the learning process; and (3) reflection, already present in the processes of self-management but given added force by assigning a central role to evaluation, including self- and peer-assessment. These principles rest on three foundations: what we know about how languages are learnt; what pedagogical theory and associated empirical research tell us about learning generally in formal educational contexts; and what various disciplines have to say about the nature of the human organism. A brief and necessarily partial exploration of these foundations will confirm the interdependence of the three principles.

Current theories of second language (L2) development assign a central role to unconscious (implicit) learning that arises from target language use, while allowing that conscious (explicit) learning also has a significant part to play (for a useful summary, see Truscott & Sharwood Smith, 2019). Theories differ in their view of the cognitive mechanisms that drive L2 development and thus of what gets learnt. Analytic theories believe in the acquisition of language as a complex system of representations in the brain, so their chief pedagogical concern is to find ways of focusing profitably on linguistic form. This leads to arguments about the relation between implicit and explicit grammatical knowledge (no interface, weak interface, strong interface). Usage-based theories, on the other hand, argue that L2 development is a matter of memorizing 'constructions' of many different types and sizes (see, e.g., Verspoor, 2017), so their pedagogical priority is to find ways of ensuring that learners are exposed to and engage with language samples that contain a sufficiently wide range of constructions and sufficient repetition to nourish the growth of proficiency.

If we take seriously the primacy of implicit learning stimulated by spontaneous language use, our first question as teachers should be: How do we engage our learners in appropriate target language use? As we have seen, language learner autonomy has a simple answer to this question: from the first, the teacher's role is not to instruct her learners in any traditional sense but to engage them in a dialogic learning conversation in the target language. We must also address two further questions: What should classroom communication be about, and how do we ensure that our learners participate? My answer to the first of these questions is that classroom communication needs two focuses: the activities and tasks that learners undertake in order to use and thus learn the language, and the learning process and its outcomes. The second of these focuses implies the principle of reflection. My answer to the second question is that we get our learners to participate by making them partners in the planning, implementation and evaluation of learning, which implies the principle of learner

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control. By grounding the activity of the classroom in their interests and thus their identity, we help our learners to 'translate' something of what they are into the target language.

When the target language is the medium of teaching and learning in this thoroughgoing way, many of the traditional concerns of applied linguistics start to seem irrelevant. For example, there is no need to worry about whether or not there is an interface between implicit and explicit knowledge. If university students study the grammar of a foreign language IN THAT LANGUAGE, they are acquiring explicit knowledge in a way that simultaneously adds to their implicit knowledge. Similarly, when learners choose their own learning activities they are engaging in a form of task-based learning that has no need to distinguish between 'pedagogical' and 'target' tasks (Long, 2015) or wonder whether their learning is 'task-based' or 'task-supported' (Ellis, 2019). From the perspective of usage-based theories, it is worth noting that in Dam's classroom learners are members of a self-sustaining community of language users. Working according to a highly predictable routine, they gradually amass sufficient constructions and repeat them often enough to become confident, fluent and accurate users of English.

In the dynamic of language learner autonomy, language learning and language use are two sides of the same coin. Thus the target language is constantly in learners' working memory, which we must suppose supports the growth of long-term memory. Sfard (2015, p. 251) argues that 'conversations with others will not produce learning unless interspersed with our quiet conversations with ourselves'. Autonomous language learners have quiet conversations with themselves when they use their logbooks to document their learning, though it's important to remember that their ability to do so derives from their proactive participation in the learning dialogue. This brings us to theories of dialogic pedagogy.

For more than half a century general pedagogical theory has argued that in order to secure optimal outcomes, learning in formal contexts should be framed by a learning conversation that is dialogic, involving the learners as fully agentive partners. So, although the teacher is responsible for launching and sustaining the learning dialogue, she is also responsible for eliciting and supporting learner initiatives. This means that she engages in a great deal of exploratory talk of the kind advocated by Douglas Barnes (1976) and described by Neil Mercer (2000) as 'thinking together'. Barnes (1976) argued that the goal of education is to help learners to integrate 'school knowledge' (curriculum content) with their 'action knowledge' (the complex of skills, attitudes, beliefs, experiential knowledge and existing subject knowledge that they bring with them to any learning situation). This is also a key goal of language teaching that fosters learner control by assigning a central role to learners' interests and identities. By definition, exploratory talk produces reflection and is the starting point for collaborative evaluation of the learning process and assessment of its outcomes – which brings us back to the principle of reflection. Dialogic pedagogy can be applied, of course, to any curriculum subject; when that subject is a foreign language, the language itself provides the content of the learning conversation, which points back to target language use.

The six principles that Alexander (2020, p. 131) argues should guide the planning and conduct of classroom talk provide an accurate description of the learning dialogue that underpins language learner autonomy:

- *Collective*. The classroom is a site of joint learning and enquiry, and, whether in groups or as a class, students and teachers are willing and able to address learning tasks together.
- *Supportive*. Students feel able to express ideas freely, without risk of embarrassment over contributions that are hesitant or tentative, or that might be judged 'wrong', and they help each other to reach common understandings.
- *Reciprocal*. Participants listen to each other, share ideas, ask questions and consider alternative viewpoints; and teachers ensure that they have ample opportunities to do so.
- *Deliberative*. Participants discuss and seek to resolve different points of view, they present and evaluate arguments, and they work towards reasoned positions and outcomes.
- *Cumulative*. Participants build on their own and each other's contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding.

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- *Purposeful*. Classroom talk, though sometimes open-ended, is nevertheless structured with specific learning goals in view.

Dialogic pedagogy seeks to engage learners' agency, making them co-responsible for the decisions that shape learning. This is not what usually happens in mainstream education, and yet it coincides with the way in which human beings are built. The philosopher Gerald Dworkin defines autonomy as

> a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of persons they are.
>
> (Dworkin, 1988, p. 20)

According to this definition, autonomy is not the preserve of an intellectual elite: to think about thinking and to have beliefs about beliefs is part of being human. As Dworkin acknowledges, it is possible to exercise second-order intentionality without being consciously aware of doing so (1988, p. 17). But the development of the individual's capacity for autonomous behaviour has long been a central educational goal, at least in democratic societies. To this end pedagogy should set out to develop learners' capacity for self-management (the principles of learner control and reflection) in ways that link the process and content of learning with their wider interests. When the focus of formal learning is a foreign language, we should want our learners to be able to exercise their autonomy in that language, and they will be able to do that only if their learning is grounded in agentive target language use.

Self-Determination Theory has identified autonomy as a basic human need and motivational drive. Edward Deci, for example, argues that our sense of self-fulfilment depends on feeling that we set our own agenda and are 'volitional in our actions' (Deci & Flaste, 1996, p. 66). But our need for autonomy co-exists with two other needs, for competence and relatedness. If the exercise of autonomy is to be truly enriching, we must also feel that we are competent to meet 'optimal challenges' (p. 66), and we must feel 'connected with others in the midst of being effective and autonomous' (p. 88): 'as people … develop a greater capacity for autonomous self-regulation, they also become capable of deeper relatedness to others' (p. 6). These words encapsulate and help to explain the increasingly collaborative and mutually supportive nature of the autonomous learning environment I have described. Language learner autonomy doesn't treat motivation as an individual variable but as the product of interaction between the individual learner and the social-interactive learning environment, of which other learners are the most important constituent (cf. Ushioda, 2011).

The impact of language learner autonomy

I applied the principles of target language use, learner control and reflection to the design and implementation of the language programmes I was responsible for in the 1990s and 2000s: Trinity College Dublin's Institution-wide Language Programme (Little & Ushioda, 1998) and intensive English-language programmes for adult refugees (Little, 2009; Little et al., 2017). The principles also shaped a programme of in-service seminars and associated materials that supported the teaching of English as an Additional Language in Irish schools (Little & Lazenby Simpson, 2009; Little et al., 2017). In all three cases, versions of the European Language Portfolio[2] were used to document and manage learning, stimulate reflection and support self- and peer-assessment. Learning outcomes were broadly similar to those achieved by Dam's learners; above all, learners became confident and fluent users of their target language.

More recently, the principles have emerged spontaneously in the highly effective approach to language education developed by an Irish primary school I have worked with, Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) (St Brigid's School for Girls), Blanchardstown. Eighty per cent of the school's 320 pupils come from immigrant families and speak a language other than English or Irish at home; most of them speak

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little or no English when they start school at the age of four and a half; and between them they have more than fifty home languages. The school encourages pupils to use their home languages inside as well as outside the classroom, implicating those languages (most of them unknown to the teachers) as fully as possible in the learning conversation. The pedagogical approach is strongly dialogic and the presence of multiple languages in each class ensures a high level of pupil attention and participation. Learning across the curriculum is embedded in reflection about language, and pupils frequently undertake ambitious language-related projects on their own initiative. This is evidently a major factor in determining the school's language education outcomes: high levels of language awareness and equally high levels of age-appropriate proficiency in speaking and writing English, Irish (the L2 of the curriculum) and French (introduced in the last two primary grades). In addition, immigrant pupils develop literacy in their home languages without benefit of explicit instruction. This version of language learner autonomy may be summarized as: agentive use of multiple languages within a strongly dialogic framework supported by non-stop writing, also in multiple languages (for a detailed case study, see Little & Kirwan, 2019).

Language learner autonomy as I have described it had its origins in the 1970s and 1980s in a small number of classrooms in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. Starting in the 1980s, language teachers and teacher educators from those countries came together in a series of biennial workshops that gradually reached out to practitioners in other countries. Those workshops continue, but these days they are mostly attended by language teacher educators and researchers; school teachers are rarely involved. The growth of interest in learner autonomy through the 1990s led the International Association of Applied Linguistics and the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) to establish special interest groups, both of which remain active. *Independence*, the newsletter of IATEFL's Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group, mostly comprises reports of classroom practice. The thread that connects them is the principle of learner control; the extent to which the principles of reflection and target language use are also followed is highly variable.

It is, of course, impossible to gauge the overall impact of language learner autonomy with any accuracy, especially as other labels are attached to closely similar pedagogies – for example, Exploratory Practice (Hanks, 2017) and Transformative Language Teaching (Leaver, Davidson, & Campbell, 2021). To judge by the relevant literature, institutional commitment to the implementation of language learner autonomy is most likely to be found in the private sector and in university language centres. The latter are historically associated with self-access learning of the kind promoted by Holec and his colleagues, and some proponents of telecollaborative language learning attach central importance to learner autonomy (Little, 2016). In other educational sectors language learner autonomy seems mostly to be pursued by individuals teaching in schools and, especially, universities.

In the literature on learner autonomy, there is a widespread tendency to treat autonomy as an individual variable which is or should be measurable. This has given rise to an apparently endless stream of questionnaire surveys that seek to describe what teachers think about the concept or to measure learners' 'readiness for autonomy'. The findings of such surveys throw no light on language learning as such. Research that uses empirical methods to explore autonomous language learning environments is extremely rare; to the best of my knowledge Dam and Legenhausen's LAALE project has never been replicated. But when teachers are mostly working on their own, it is perhaps enough for them that their learners are fluent users of their target language even as they learn.

Conclusion: Future prospects

In briefly considering future prospects I shall focus on the school sector, which is where it all began back in the 1970s. The first point to make is that, despite the promise of the communicative turn in the late 1970s, language learning outcomes in the school systems of many countries remain disappointing, as the European Survey on Language Competences confirmed (European Commission, 2012). The proficiency levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) are widely

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used by national education systems to indicate desired learning outcomes, but little attention is paid to the CEFR's wider implications. Although it is reticent on matters of pedagogy, its 'action-oriented' descriptive scheme and its insistence on the agency of the individual learner imply an approach to language teaching and learning closely similar to the one I have described in this article (Little & Erickson, 2015; Little et al., 2017). Unless languages are taught in ways that ground them in learners' agency, interests and identity, widespread plurilingualism, defined by the CEFR as 'a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4), is unlikely to be achieved.

The Council of Europe devised the European Language Portfolio (ELP) as a way of mediating the ethos of the CEFR to learners, and when it was first launched in 2001 there was a widespread expectation that it would be a powerful catalyst of pedagogical reform. But although the Council of Europe validated 118 ELPs between 2000 and 2010,[3] none of them seems to have survived in large-scale use. The publication of the CEFR *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2020) will no doubt stimulate renewed discussion of the pedagogical implications of the CEFR's 'action-oriented' approach to the description of L2 proficiency. But lasting change is unlikely without a thoroughgoing rethink that embraces curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and – perhaps most important of all – language teacher education. As I pointed out 25 years ago (Little, 1995), it's unreasonable to expect teachers to follow the principles of language learner autonomy unless they know from their own experience what it is to be an autonomous language learner. This argument carries at least two implications for the implementation of language learner autonomy: student teachers should learn how to manage and document their own learning and how to engage in peer- and self-assessment; and their learning should be embedded in a dialogue that is partially enacted in the language(s) they will teach (for further discussion, see Little et al., 2017).

My final thought concerns research into instructed L2 acquisition (ISLA). Truscott and Sharwood Smith have recently argued in favour of theoretical L2 acquisition frameworks within which specific theories can be articulated and hypotheses formulated and tested. They point out that '[n]arrow frameworks that are not related to wider explanations will force busy researchers to rely on their background assumptions about the mind' (Truscott & Sharwood Smith, 2019, p. 90). Much research into ISLA seems to rely on background assumptions about teaching that are never made explicit: teaching is teaching is teaching. ISLA no less than SLA needs to operate with frameworks that are supported by research in many different disciplines, describe in detail the kinds of teaching and learning behaviour those frameworks imply, and support the formulation of more specific theories and the testing of hypotheses. Language learner autonomy as I have defined, illustrated and discussed it in this article provides a basis for one such framework. It has the advantage of being grounded in notably successful language teaching practice.

Endnotes

[1] A *Folkeskole* ('people's school') provides for the whole of compulsory education in Denmark, from 6 to 16. Entry is non-selective and classes are not streamed.

[2] The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was conceived by the Council of Europe as a companion piece to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001). Its stated purpose is to foster the development of learner autonomy, intercultural awareness and plurilingualism. Further information is available on the Council of Europe's ELP website, http://coe.int/portfolio.

[3] For details, go to http://www.coe.int/portfolio.

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