State-of-the-art article

Autonomy in language teaching and learning

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There has been a remarkable growth of interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning in recent years. Focusing on work published since the turn of the 20th century, this review examines major trends in the recent literature on autonomy related to the emergence of alternative views of autonomy, new contexts of practice and interaction with concepts such as self-regulation, motivation, sociocultural theory and teacher development. The review also covers relevant developments in the philosophy of autonomy and the role of autonomy in global educational policy and reform. It concludes by discussing possible directions for future research in the field.

1. Introduction

In Benson (2001), I reviewed the literature on autonomy in language teaching and learning from its origins in the mid-1970s up to the end of the 20th century. Since the turn of the century, however, interest in autonomy has grown considerably. Conferences have been held in Europe, Asia, Australasia and Latin America and at the AILA 2005 World Congress no less than 36 contributions from 18 countries were listed under the heading of autonomy. In terms of sheer quantity, the literature on autonomy published since 2000 exceeds the literature published over the previous 25 years. Focusing on the recent literature, the present review explores how this growing interest in autonomy is influencing theory and practice, leading to the emergence of new directions in research. Aside from contributions to major journals, recent publications on autonomy in language education include:

- More than 20 book length publications on autonomy, including collaborative projects (Little, Ridley & Ushioda 2002, 2003; Barfield & Nix 2003; van Esch & St. John 2003), journal special issues (Victori 2000; Dam 2001), collections from conferences (Karlsson, Kjisik & Nordlund 2000; Ribé 2000; Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb 2000; Benson & Toogood 2002; Mackenzie & McCafferty 2002; Vieira et al. 2002; Reinders et al. 2004; Benson 2006b; Gardner 2006; Lamb & Reinders 2006; Miller 2006) and collections of commissioned papers (Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans 2001; Lewis & Walker 2003; Palfreyman & Smith 2003; Lamb & Reinders 2007).
- Short summary articles appearing in encyclopedias and handbooks (Little 2000a; Benson 2003, 2006a; Wright 2005) and on the web (Thanasoulas 2000; Little 2002a), including entries on learner autonomy in the online Macmillan English Dictionary (2002) and Wikipedia (2006b).
- Guides for teachers and learners focusing on autonomy and independent learning (Scharle & Szabó 2000; Fernandez-Toro & Jones 2001; Hurd & Murphy 2005).
- Chapters on autonomy in general guides to language teaching (Hedge 2000; Harmer 2001; Kumaravadivelu 2003) and in more specialized work, such as Nation (2001) on vocabulary, Thornbury (2005) on speaking, Dörnyei (2001a) on motivation, White (2003) on distance learning and Littlemore & Low (2006) on figurative thinking.
- Papers on autonomy appearing in collections covering topics not directly related to autonomy, including affect (Aoki 1999), communicative language teaching (Schalkwijk et al. 2002), language policy (Lamb 2000b; Lamb & Reinders 2005), CALL (Blin 1999; Healy 1999; Hoven 1999; Wachman 1999; Little 2001; Littlemore 2001), ELT (Holliday 2005) and EAP (Lynch 2001). Holmberg, Shelley & White's (2005) book on distance language learning and Jiménez Raya & Lamb's (2003) book on differentiation both include several chapters on autonomy.

The narrative thread that ties this review together is, therefore, one of a growth of interest in autonomy that has reached a point where it has begun to overflow the banks of the specialist literature. Particular concerns include the ways in which conceptions of autonomy are changing within our field, and the ways in which new conceptions of autonomy fit in with broader developments in language teaching

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and learning theory, educational practice and social thought. The sheer quantity of work on autonomy published since the turn of century calls for a selective approach. Work that ploughs familiar ground is not covered in detail, in order to save space for references from fields that are relevant to, but not directly concerned with autonomy in language education. These include fields of language education research – learning strategies and self-regulation, motivation, individual differences and sociocultural approaches, and teacher development – as well as the fields of philosophy and education policy. The treatment of work from these fields is even more selective, however, and as far as possible I have cited studies with comprehensive lists of references that will guide readers who wish to dig deeper.

2. The rise of autonomy in language education

2.1 A brief history

The early history of autonomy in language education is well documented (Gremmo & Riley 1995; Little 1991, 2000a; Benson 2001; Holec 2007). In brief, it begins with the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, which led to the publication of Holec's (1981) seminal report, in which autonomy was defined as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p. 3). Important work from this period can also be found in early issues of the journal *Mélanges Pédagogiques* and in papers presented at a 1976 seminar at the University of Cambridge (Harding-Esch 1977). Early pedagogical experiments related to autonomy were inspired by humanistic expectations aroused by the political turmoil and 'counter-cultures' of late-1960s Europe (Holec 1981; Gremmo & Riley 1995). Practical applications focused on self-directed learning and led to the development of self-access centres and learner training as focal points for experimentation. Although Holec (1981) treated autonomy as an attribute of the learner, the term was also used to describe learning situations. In his book on self-instruction, Dickinson (1987: 11), for example, described autonomy as 'the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions'.

As Allwright (1988: 35) put it, the idea of learner autonomy was for a long time 'associated with a radical restructuring of language pedagogy' that involved 'the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working'. To put this comment in context, many of the early experiments were designed for adults who did not necessarily have the time, inclination or opportunity to attend classroom-based courses. For Allwright, however, autonomy needed to be re-conceptualized if it was to be applied to the classroom. Autonomy could, for example, be recognized in students' unpredictable contributions to classroom activities that could temporarily throw the teacher's plans off course. In his book on learner training, Dickinson (1992) also argued that learners often acted 'independently', both cognitively and behaviourally, in the classroom, while Dam (1995) demonstrated how principles of autonomy could be integrated into secondary school classrooms without self-access or formal learner training. This turn towards classroom applications led a second wave of interest in autonomy in the 1990s, with important theoretical implications. Little's (1991) book on learner autonomy, for example, emphasized the psychological attributes of autonomous learners and prioritized 'interdependence' over 'independence' in learning. And in an early paper on teacher autonomy, Little (1995) argued that learner autonomy did not imply any particular mode of practice, but was instead dependent upon the quality of the 'pedagogical dialogue' between teachers and learners.

With the proliferation of self-access centres in the 1990s and more recent developments related to computer-based modes of teaching and learning, however, Allwright's (1988) 'radical restructuring of language pedagogy' has become a reality that many language teachers must now come to terms with. The deconstruction of conventional language learning classrooms and courses in many parts of the world is thus a third context for growing interest in autonomy in recent years. Indeed, the tendency has been towards a blurring of the distinction between 'classroom' and 'out-of-class' applications, leading to new and often complex understandings of the role of autonomy in language teaching and learning.

2.2 Definitions

Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy has proved remarkably robust and remains the most widely cited definition in the field. Variations on this definition abound. 'Ability' is often replaced by 'capacity' (a term used by Holec elsewhere), while 'take charge of' is often replaced by 'take responsibility for' or 'take control of' one's own learning (terms also used by Holec). The key element in definitions of this kind is the idea that autonomy is an attribute of learners, rather than learning situations (cf. Dickinson 1987: 11). The strengthening of this view, based on the assumption that learners do not develop the ability to self-direct their learning simply by being placed in situations where they have no other option, is one of the more significant developments in the definition of learner autonomy over the past 30 years. Many advocates of autonomy argue that some degree of freedom in learning is required if learners are to develop their autonomy. But most accept that freedom in learning is not the same thing as autonomy and this freedom will always

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be constrained, a view expressed most cogently by Little (1996).

A second important development has been a growing emphasis on the psychology of learner autonomy. Although Holec frequently discussed the qualities of autonomous learners, his description of what 'taking charge of one's own learning' involves, which emphasized planning, the selection of materials, monitoring learning progress and self-assessment, arguably focused on the mechanics of day-to-day learning management (Holec 1981: 4). In contrast, Little (1991) placed psychology at the heart of learner autonomy. In one interesting recent definition, Little (2000a: 69) combined Holec's definition with his own:

> Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action (see Little 1991: 4); autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes. (Holec 1981: 3)

Although the relationship between these two aspects of autonomy is not made explicit, the assumption is that the capacity to manage one's own learning depends upon certain underlying psychological capacities. From this perspective, Holec (1981) described the exercise of autonomy, rather than autonomy itself. In other words, although his definition explained WHAT autonomous learners are able to do, it did not explain HOW they are able to do it.

Little's psychological approach also raised a new question. What exactly are the most important components of autonomy in language learning? The recent theoretical literature includes a number of interesting, if inconclusive, attempts to answer this question (Littlewood 1996; Pemberton 1996; Breen & Mann 1997; Sinclair 2000; Benson 2001; Finch 2002; Oxford 2003). The difficulty of defining learner autonomy in terms of its most important components has also been expressed in two assumptions that have achieved widespread consensus: that there are 'degrees of autonomy' (Nunan 1997: 192) and that the behaviour of autonomous learners 'can take numerous different forms, depending on their age, how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be, and so on' (Little 1991: 4). Attention has therefore shifted to the RANGE OF potential meanings for the idea of learner autonomy and to the different ways in which these meanings are represented in research and practice.

3. Mainstream autonomy and its critics

Theoretical work on the concept of learner autonomy to the mid-1990s aimed to specify what the goal of autonomy entails. In the theoretical literature published over the past ten years or so, however, autonomy appears as a more problematic concept as the closely related ideas that there may be different levels of autonomy and different ways of representing autonomy have been explored. The radicalism of the concept of autonomy has also been challenged by a number of writers who have attempted to reconstruct its relevance to language teaching and learning in innovative ways. This deconstruction of the concept of autonomy arises from the assumption that autonomy is both contextually-variable and a matter of degree and from concerns that 'mainstream' views of autonomy pay scant regard to cultural variability within language education on a global scale.

3.1 Levels of autonomy

In the late 1990s a number of writers sought to operationalize the notion that autonomy is a matter of degree. Nunan's (1997: 195) attempt involved a model of five levels of 'learner action' – 'awareness', 'involvement', 'intervention', 'creation' and 'transcendence' – which could inform the sequencing of learner development activities in language textbooks. These levels also involved dimensions of 'content' and 'process'. At the awareness level, for example, learners would be 'made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials', 'identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks', and 'identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies'. At the transcendence level, learners would 'make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond' and 'become teachers and researchers'.

While Nunan's model remained within the framework of language learning, Littlewood's (1997: 81) three-stage model involved dimensions of language acquisition, learning approach and personal development. In the context of language acquisition, autonomy involved 'an ability to operate independently with the language and use it to communicate personal meanings in real, unpredictable situations' (autonomy as a communicator). In the context of classroom organization, it involved learners' 'ability to take responsibility for their own learning and to apply active, personally relevant strategies' ('autonomy as a learner'). And in a broader context, it involved 'a higher-level goal of . . . greater generalized autonomy as individuals' ('autonomy as a person'). At around the same time, Macaro (1997: 170–172) proposed a somewhat similar three-stage model involving 'autonomy of language competence', 'autonomy of language learning competence' and 'autonomy of choice and action'. Scharle & Szabó's (2000: 1) resource book for the development of autonomy was also informed by a three phase model involving 'raising awareness', 'changing attitudes' and 'transferring roles'.

Littlewood was also responsible for a widely-cited distinction between 'proactive' autonomy, 'which affirms [learners'] individuality and sets up

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directions which they themselves have partially created', and reactive autonomy, 'which does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal' (Littlewood 1999: 75). My own attempt to model levels of learner autonomy involved dimensions of control over language learning and teaching processes grouped under three main headings – learning management, cognitive processing and the content of learning (Benson 2001).

Each of these models implies a possible progression from 'lower' to 'higher' levels of autonomy. They may also be related to the movement of the idea of autonomy into mainstream language education and a perceived need to identify spaces at the lower levels, where autonomy might be fostered without radical educational reforms. Nunan (1997: 201), for example, argued that his model illustrated how 'autonomy can be a normal, everyday addition to regular instruction'. How far one wants to go in encouraging autonomy, he suggested, 'will be dictated by the contexts and environments in which the teaching and learning takes place'. Littlewood (1999: 75) also argued that although for many writers 'proactive autonomy is the only kind that counts', reactive autonomy had its place either as a step towards proactive autonomy, or as a goal in its own right. One problem with such models, however, is their assumption that the relationship between the development of autonomy and language proficiency is unproblematic. Kumaravadivelu (2003: 144) has argued, for example, that 'it would be a mistake to try to correlate the initial, intermediary, and advanced stages of autonomy . . . with the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of language proficiency', because the stages of autonomy depend more on the linguistic and communicative demands of particular tasks.

3.2 Versions of autonomy

To the best of my knowledge, Benson (1997) was the first paper to introduce the idea of different 'versions', or ways of representing, the idea of autonomy. The terms 'technical', 'psychological' and 'political' were used to describe three major versions of autonomy in language education circles. Subsequent writers have cut the cake in different ways and distinctions introduced in the recent literature include Ribé's (2003) 'convergence', 'divergence-convergence' and 'convergence-divergence' positions; O'Rourke & Schwienhorst's (2003) 'individual-cognitive', 'social-interactive' and 'exploratory-participatory' perspectives; Oxford's (2003) expanded version of Benson's model, which recognized 'technical', 'psychological', 'sociocultural', and 'political-critical' perspectives; and Holliday's (2003) 'native-speakerist', 'cultural-relativist' and 'social' approaches. Smith (2003) has made a more general distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' pedagogies for autonomy, while Kumaravadivelu (2003) makes a similar distinction between 'narrow' and 'broad' views of autonomy.

These models are again related to the movement of the idea of autonomy into mainstream language education, as each implies a distinction between mainstream perspectives and more radical, socially-oriented, alternatives. Smith (2003: 131), for example, associates 'weak pedagogies' with the idea of autonomy 'as a capacity which students currently lack (and so need 'training' towards)'. 'Strong pedagogies' on the other hand, are based on the assumption that students are 'already autonomous' to some degree, and focus on 'co-creating with students optimal conditions for the exercise of their own autonomy'. Ribé (2003: 15) similarly associates 'convergence' models of autonomy with a movement towards shared, other-directed curriculum goals, while 'divergence' models are associated with more open approaches to language curricula in which autonomy 'lies in the wide range of choices around the process affecting almost all levels of control, management and strategic decisions'.

Most of these models also recognize the legitimacy, in certain contexts, of all of the representations of autonomy they describe. Ribé (2003) argues, for example, that 'an optimal learning environment probably requires a mixture of the three perspectives' he describes. Oxford (2003: 90) also argues that research on autonomy should combine as many perspectives as possible and 'no single perspective should be considered antithetical to any other' (p. 90). But there is usually an implication that the 'stronger' versions are, in fact, more legitimate than the 'weaker' ones. The process of modelling versions of autonomy is, indeed, often a device for critiquing versions perceived as 'mainstream' for their focus on the 'lower' levels of autonomy. Central to this critique is the argument that language learners are far more capable of autonomous action, especially in regard to decisions about the content of learning, than teachers typically suppose. From this perspective a gradualist, step-by-step approach, in which the 'higher' levels of autonomy may never be addressed, may restrict, rather than foster, the development of autonomy.

3.3 Alternatives to mainstream autonomy

The stronger versions of autonomy identified in the models discussed above tend to fall within the broad conceptual framework of the earlier theoretical work discussed in section 2. Some writers, however, have offered more radical alternatives. Pennycook (1997) first introduced the idea of 'mainstream' autonomy, identified by its concern with individual learner psychology and learning strategies, into the literature. He replaced this concern with the view that, in

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the context of the global spread of ELT, autonomy was mainly a matter of helping students to 'find a voice in English' and 'confront a range of cultural constructions as they learn English' (Pennycook 1997: 48). Holliday's (2003: 117) notion of 'social autonomy', based on the assumption that 'autonomy resides in the social worlds of the students, which they bring with them from their lives outside the classroom' also departs radically from conventional conceptions of autonomy in language learning. Most recently, Schmenk (2005: 112) has argued that the promotion of autonomy as a universal good in language education depends upon a 'glossing over' of questions concerning 'what autonomy might entail in specific social, cultural, or institutional learning contexts', which 'leaves the concept devoid of specific characteristics and thus facilitates its homogenization'. Schmenk argues that the concept of autonomy has value, nevertheless, provided that language educators 'admit that autonomy is not a universal and neutral concept and that it encompasses a critical awareness of one's own possibilities and limitations within particular contexts' (p. 115).

Pennycook, Holliday and Schmenk are especially critical of the purposes to which the idea of autonomy is currently being put in mainstream ELT contexts. For Holliday (2003; 2005), for example, the idea of autonomy is central to dominant ELT discourses which counterpose the active Western student to the passive non-Western 'Other'. While many researchers on autonomy would share this concern, the identification of the concept of autonomy with its 'mainstream' representations is more problematic. As we have seen, the concept of autonomy can be represented in various ways and it is by no means clear that there is, in fact, a single 'mainstream' representation of the concept (see section 4.2 below) within ELT, or that trends within ELT thinking on autonomy are representative of foreign language education more generally. The alternative conceptions of autonomy that these critiques propose are also somewhat vaguely formulated and inadequately motivated in both theoretical and empirical terms.

3.4 Autonomy and culture

The idea that autonomy is a Western ideal, emphasizing the positive value of 'active participation' and 'individualism', is fundamental to the critiques of autonomy discussed above. This idea has also been discussed, however, in a number of papers on autonomy in Asia in the 1990s, which largely argue for group-oriented approaches to the implementation of autonomy in these settings (see reviews in Smith 2001; Palfreyman 2003b). More recently, Sonaiya (2002) has argued that the idea of autonomy is inappropriate to African settings. Sonaiya's argument is, however, mainly directed at individualized, technology-based approaches to language instruction. This critique illustrates how debates on autonomy and culture are often less concerned with appropriateness of the principle that learners should take more control of their learning than they are with the appropriateness of methods of teaching and learning associated with this principle.

Palfreyman & Smith's (2003) recent collection of papers thus represents an important attempt to take the discussion of autonomy and culture beyond discussion of teaching and learning methods. Palfreyman (2003b), for example, discusses the different ways in which various stakeholders involved in attempts to implement autonomy in a Turkish university understood and represented the concept, while Aoki & Hamakawa (2003) attempt to break away from ethnic or national conceptions of culture, by exploring issues of autonomy from a feminist perspective. There has also been a trend in the recent literature to seek harder empirical evidence on responses to the idea of autonomy among students from China (Tang 1999; Gan, Humphrey & Hamp-Lyons 2004; Gieve & Clark 2005; Huang 2006a; Ruan 2006), Hong Kong (Littlewood 1999; 2000; Chan, Spratt & Humphrey 2002; Braine 2003) and Japan (Smith 2001; 2003; Nix 2002; Snyder 2002; Tomei 2002). Although the findings of these studies are mixed, they do show that many Asian students value freedom in language learning and the opportunity to direct their own learning. They also highlight the fact that the cultural appropriateness of autonomy has mainly been addressed in relation to non-Western ELT students. One issue that deserves further attention is the sense in which foreign language study necessarily involves inter-cultural learning (Sercu 2002) and a challenge to culturally-conditioned conceptions of the self (Benson, Chik & Lim 2003; Riley 2003).

4. Contexts of application

The trajectory of autonomy in language education up to the end of the 20th century was characterized by an early focus on self-directed learning in self-access centres, followed in the 1990s by a shift toward classroom applications. But the proliferation of self-access centres in 1990s meant that self-access remained a central focus of attention. Since the turn of the century, the importance of self-access within the literature on autonomy has diminished somewhat, but this does not mean that the pendulum has decisively switched toward classroom applications. In this section, I will discuss contexts of application for autonomy since the turn of the century under two broad headings – 'beyond' and 'within' the classroom – although, as we will see, a hard-edged distinction between these two broad contexts is increasingly difficult to maintain.

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4.1 Autonomy beyond the classroom

The development of applied linguistics in the 20th century was grounded in the institutionalization of language learning and the assumption that languages are normally acquired in classrooms (Benson 2005). In this context, self-access centres were initially viewed as a radical alternative to the classroom. In the 1990s, however, the self-access centre became a standard feature of institutionalized language learning in many parts of the world and other alternatives also emerged to challenge the idea that the classroom-based learning is the norm. Each of these modes of practice deserves its own more detailed review. This review focuses on key references and work discussing issues of autonomy.

- Self-access. Gardner & Miller's (1999) book on self-access is the most comprehensive work in this field. Since its publication, the difficulty of making self-access centres work independently of teacher-support for autonomy has become a prominent theme in the literature. There has also been a shift of attention from the organization of self-access centres to the integration of self-access learning with coursework (Toogood & Pemberton 2002; Fisher, Hafner & Young 2006; Gardner 2006; Kisjick 2006;) and self-access advising as a particular form of teaching (Carter 2001; Clemente 2001; Crabbe, Hoffman & Cotterall 2001; Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans 2001; Pemberton et al. 2001; Bailly & Ciekanski 2006; Hobbs & Jones-Parry 2006; Toogod & Pemberton 2006; Gremmo & Castillo 2007).
- CALL. With the advent of the Internet, computer technology has played a pervasive role in institutionalized and non-institutionalized language learning. Several recent contributions to the vast literature in this area have emphasized opportunities for learner autonomy within CALL and the importance of attention to autonomy in the development and use of CALL technologies (Blin 1999; Healy 1999; Hoven 1999; Murray 1999; Wachman 1999; Dias 2000; Littlemore 2001; O'Rourke & Schwienhorst 2003; Schwienhorst 2003; Benson 2004; Corder & Waller 2006).
- Distance learning. The recent growth of distance language learning has led to a corresponding growth in the literature, in which issues of autonomy are prominent (Hurd, Beaven & Ortega 2001; White & Shelley 2003; Holmberg et al. 2005; Hurd 2005, Murphy 2006; White 2003, 2006a, b; Baumann 2006). Distance learning has also begun to merge with CALL through concepts such as 'online learning', 'cyberschools', 'asynchronous learning networks' and 'telematics', in which issues of autonomy are less frequently discussed (White 2003: 27ff.).
- Tandem learning. Tandem learning, in which 'two people who are learning each others' language work together to help one another' (Lewis 2005: 106), has a long association with autonomy. Lewis (2005) notes that while it was something of a minority interest before the rise of the Internet, 22 UK universities now offer tandem learning to their students and projects have developed in Europe, Japan, Russia and the USA. Issues of autonomy are often discussed in the growing literature in this field (Müller-Hartmann 2000; Little 2001; Kötter 2002; Lewis & Walker 2003; Lewis 2005).
- Study abroad. Language learning programmes now frequently incorporate periods in which students spend time in target language communities. These include 'study abroad' visits in North American modern language education (Pellegrino Aveni 2005), 'immersion' visits in many Asian ELT courses (Bodycott & Crew 2001) and longer periods of 'residence abroad', more characteristic of UK and European university settings (Coleman 2000, 2005; Ife 2000). Although many of these overseas programmes involve classroom instruction, their main purpose is usually for the students to learn independently through interaction with native speakers. Autonomy is clearly relevant to such programmes, although it has not to date played a prominent role in published work.
- Out-of-class learning. In the recent literature on autonomy, the term 'out-of-class learning' has been used, somewhat narrowly, to refer to the efforts of learners taking classroom-based language courses to find opportunities for language learning and use outside class (Hyland 2004; M. Lamb 2004; Pearson 2004). Surprisingly, this is a relatively new area in the literature on autonomy. Recent studies suggest that students tend to engage in out-of-class learning activities more frequently than their teachers know, often showing considerable creativity in situations where opportunities for out-of-class learning appear to be limited.
- Self-instruction. In a narrow sense, self-instruction refers to the use of printed or broadcast self-study materials. In a broader sense, it refers to situations in which learners undertake language study largely or entirely without the aid of teachers. Although it played an important role in the early literature on autonomy, self-instruction in the narrower sense was soon recognized as a particularly 'other-directed' mode of learning (Benson 2001: 62), while its broader sense was largely subsumed within the concept of self-directed learning. In both senses, self-instruction has received little attention in the language learning literature, although recent contributions by Fernández-Toro (1999) and Fernández-Toro & Jones (2001) are worth noting, together with papers on the use of broadcast language learning materials in Japan (Umino 1999, 2005) and papers describing the experiences of entirely self-instructed learners (Murray 2004; Murray & Kojima 2006). This work tends to take a broader view of self-instruction and is sensitive to the importance of the development

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of autonomy for learners who persist in their efforts.

The relationship between learning beyond the classroom and autonomy is complex. On the one hand, all the modes of learning discussed above involve autonomous learning as Dickinson (1987) defined it. On the other, they demand a capacity for autonomy as Holec (1981) and others have defined it. The important question is whether engagement in learning beyond the classroom fosters the development of this capacity or not. One of the most prominent themes in the literature on this area is the need for teacher support. This is also recognized in the emerging concept of 'blended' or 'distributed' learning, which refers to various combinations of modes of teaching and learning, most frequently those that 'combine an electronic learning component with some form of human intervention' (Wikipedia 2006a). Although I am aware of only one contribution to the literature on autonomy in language learning directly concerned with blended learning (Stracke 2006), the concept is clearly relevant in the light of increased use of Virtual Learning Environments in the context of self-access and classroom-based courses (Reinders 2007). It should be noted, however, that although the growing literature on non-classroom based modes of learning includes contributions that discuss autonomy, these are greatly outnumbered by contributions of a technical kind that pay little attention to the difficulties many learners experience in directing their own learning. There is a perhaps a need for the idea of 'learning beyond the classroom' to be theorized in the same way that 'classroom learning' has been theorized in recent years.

4.2 Autonomy in the classroom

The shift towards classroom applications of autonomy that started in the early 1990s is reflected in several recent collections of papers with a strong focus on the classroom (Mackenzie & McCafferty 2002; Barfield & Nix 2003; Little et al. 2003; Palfreyman & Smith 2003; Miller 2006). Small-scale experiments involving group work and cooperative classroom decision-making are prominent in these collections (see also Thomson 1998; Hart 2002; Littlewood 2002; Coyle 2003; Lamb 2003). While this work often treads familiar ground, recent studies of larger-scale curriculum-based approaches to autonomy in the classroom (Dam 1995 being the only significant example from the 1990s) are important additions to the literature. These include Breen & Littlejohn's (2000) collection on negotiated learning, Little et al.'s (2002) report on a collaborative project with teachers in Irish secondary schools, Lynch (2001) on an innovative learning training programme for EAP at Edinburgh University, Wolff (2003) on content and language integration, and Cotterall (2000) on course design for autonomy. A second important development, straddling classroom and non-classroom applications, is renewed attention to the assessment of autonomy (Sinclair 1999; Champagne et al. 2001; Lai 2001; Rivers 2001), of language learning gains in autonomous learning programmes (Dam 2000; Legenhausen 2001; 2003), and appropriate methods of assessment for such programmes, including self-assessment and portfolios (Ektabani & Pierson 2000; Little 2002b, 2003, 2005; Peñaflorida 2002; Simonian & Robertson 2002; Small 2002; Salaberri & Appel 2003; Shimo 2003; Morrison 2005).

The most significant development in the field of classroom autonomy, however, is marked by the appearance of several general books on language teaching and learning with sections on autonomy, including Hedge (2000), Harmer (2001) and Kumaravadivelu (2003) on teaching methodology, Nation (2001) on vocabulary and Thornbury (2005) on speaking. These books provide us with the most striking evidence of the movement of autonomy into mainstream language education, and while it is tempting to view them as examples of the 'weaker' versions of autonomy discussed in section 3, the approaches taken differ from one another. In Harmer's (2001) *The practice of English language teaching*, learner autonomy shares space with teacher development in a chapter added to the end of the 3rd edition of the book. Although the suggestions on learner training, classroom decision-making and out-of-class learning are useful, they also seem to be something of an afterthought in the final chapter of a book that does not otherwise mention autonomy. Hedge's (2000) chapter entitled 'Learner autonomy and learner training', on the other hand, is one of three introductory chapters (following 'Learners and learning: classrooms and contexts' and 'The communicative classroom') which frame the approach taken in the book as a whole.

Most interesting in this respect is Kumaravadivelu's (2003) chapter on autonomy – one of ten covering 'macrostrategies', or 'guiding principles derived from historical, theoretical, empirical, and experiential insights related to L2 learning and teaching' (p. 38). Although it offers practical advice to teachers, the book differs from others in its 'post-method' assumptions. The 'post-method condition', Kumaravadivelu argues, signifies 'a search for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method' and a 'principled pragmatism' (as opposed to 'eclecticism') that focuses on 'how classroom learning can be shaped and reshaped by teachers as a result of self-observation, self-analysis, and self-evaluation' (pp. 32f.). As noted above, Kumaravadivelu also makes a distinction between 'narrow' and 'broad' views of autonomy: 'the narrow view maintains that the chief goal of learner autonomy is to learn to learn

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while the broad view maintains that the goal should be to learn to liberate' (p. 133). It would be a mistake, then, to make a simplistic equation between the appearance of autonomy in mainstream literature and the emergence of weaker 'mainstream views' of autonomy. Hedge's and Kumaravadivelu's contributions, in particular, include substantial reviews of the literature that recognize a range of perspectives. The positioning of their chapters on autonomy also represents an attempt to integrate autonomy within reconfigured views of the language teaching and learning process, which is often absent from literature focusing on autonomy.

Benson (2007) discusses the implications of the rise of 'classroom autonomy' in more detail, arguing that it has led to a re-conceptualization of autonomy as a 'usable' construct for teachers who want to help their learners develop autonomy without necessarily challenging constraints of classroom and curriculum organization to which they are subject. In this sense, the rise of the 'weaker' versions of autonomy discussed in section 3 is associated with the rise of classroom autonomy. But the work on curriculum level applications of autonomy discussed above, together with Hedge's (2000) and Kumaravadivelu's (2003) contributions to the wider literature point to the possibility of 'stronger' versions of classroom autonomy. The importance of confronting constraints on autonomy in classroom settings is also an important theme in recent work on teacher autonomy (see section 5.4 below). Work on autonomy beyond the classroom, however, is also characterized by weaker and stronger versions of the concept – the former often bypassing issues of curriculum and institutional constraint within non-classroom settings. In this respect, White's (2003) book, which explores issues of the distribution of control in distance learning and related settings and outlines a conception of autonomy based on dimensions of 'learner involvement' and 'collaborative control', is a welcome contribution to a debate that has until recently been largely confined to classroom applications.

5. Interaction with language education theory

As the idea of autonomy has moved beyond the specialist literature into mainstream language education contexts, it has also begun to interact with other important concepts in the field. These include learning strategies and self-regulation, motivation, individual differences and sociocultural theory, and teacher development.

5.1 Learning strategies and self-regulation

The concept of learning strategies is directly related to the practice of 'strategy training' and contributes to the practices of 'learner training', or 'learner development' (Wenden 2002). Among these three terms, 'learner training' has the longer history within the field of autonomy. From the late 1980s, European writers on learner training began to incorporate insights from North American learning strategy research into their work, while writers on learning strategies also began to incorporate insights from the field of autonomy (Wenden 1991; Cohen 1998; Macaro 2001; Oxford 2003). In the 1990s, autonomy was more closely allied with learning strategies than it was with any other language education concept, although it has often been argued that learner autonomy involves more than use of learning strategies and that learner training should not be limited to training in strategy use (Little 2000c; Palfreyman 2003a). In preference to the idea of strategy training, Little (2000c: 23) proposed a holistic view of 'strategic control of language learning and use', which develops in the classroom as a by-product of target language use and active involvement in planning, monitoring and evaluation processes (p. 25). Cohen (1998, 2002) has expressed a similar view within the learning strategy literature and has contributed to courses at the University of Minnesota, which focus on helping learners 'to be more in touch with (a) their learning style preferences and language strategy choices on specific tasks, and (b) their motivational temperature', rather than strategy instruction (Cohen 2002: 62).

Learning strategies, learner training and learner development continue to be a focus of interest in the recent literature on autonomy (Evans 2002; Evans Nachi 2003; Gao 2003; Jiménez-Raya & Lamb 2003a; Mizuki 2003; Huang 2006b; Mozzon-McPherson & Dantec 2006). But in the wider literature doubts have been expressed about the centrality of learning strategies to learner development, with increased attention being paid to constructs such as 'learner beliefs' (Mori 1999; Wenden 1999; Kalaja & Barcelos 2003; Usuki 2003), 'metacognitive knowledge' (Wenden 1998), 'learner self-management' (Rubin 2001), and 'self-regulation' (Dörnyei 2005). In one of the more trenchant recent critiques of learning strategy research, Dörnyei (2005: 170) suggests that language learning research is now lagging behind the field of educational psychology, which more or less abandoned the notion of learning strategies in the 1990s in favour of the 'more versatile concept' of self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman 1998; Bockaerts, Pintrich & Zeidner 2000). Although Dörnyei may overstate the case, his argument is an interesting one because self-regulation, understood as 'the degree to which individuals are active participants in their own learning' (Dörnyei 2005: 191), comes much closer than learning strategies to the concept of autonomy.

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5.2 Motivation

Although the link between motivation and autonomy is in some ways self-evident – both are centrally concerned with learners' active involvement in learning – it has only been explored systematically within the last decade, in part due to the earlier dominance of Gardner's 'socio-psychological' paradigm in L2 motivation research (Dörnyei 2001b: 47–54). A resurgence of interest in motivation in the 1990s and the exploration of alternative paradigms, notably 'attribution theory' and 'self-determination theory' has introduced elements into L2 motivation theory that are clearly relevant to autonomy. Dickinson (1995) and Ushioda (1996) were among the first to explore links between autonomy and motivation based on these new paradigms, and subsequent work has developed the idea that enhanced motivation is conditional upon learners taking responsibility for their own learning (Lamb 2001; da Silva 2002; Sakui 2002a; Takagi 2003; Ushioda 2003, 2006). Spratt, Humphrey & Chan (2002), on the other hand, based on survey evidence from university students in Hong Kong, claim that it is motivation that precedes autonomy. Although the correlational evidence in their study actually says little about causality, it does suggest that we should be cautious in assuming that greater responsibility for learning enhances motivation independently of students' broader willingness to engage in language learning processes.

The idea of autonomy has been introduced into L2 motivation studies mainly through Deci & Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. Their work emphasizes both the power of 'intrinsic motivation' (understood as 'the vitality, spontaneity, genuineness, and curiosity that is intrinsic to people's nature') and the importance of a 'sense of personal autonomy' (understood as a feeling that 'their behaviour is truly chosen by them rather than imposed by some external source') to the development of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Flaste 1995: 30). Understood broadly in this sense, autonomy has begun to play an important role in work on L2 motivation. In Dörnyei & Csizér (1998), for example, promoting learner autonomy appeared as one of 'ten commandments' for motivating learners, while Dörnyei's (2001a: 102–108) book on motivational strategies included a section on 'creating learner autonomy', which covered various techniques for enhancing learners' sense of control over their learning. Noels and her colleagues have also incorporated self-determination theory into their model of L2 motivation, and their empirical work has suggested relationships between teacher support for student autonomy and students' sense of self-determination (Noels, Clément & Pelletier 1999; Noels et al. 2000; McIntosh & Noels 2004).

Ushioda has made major contributions to the fields of both autonomy and motivation. Drawing largely on self-determination theory, her earlier work emphasized self-motivation as a crucial factor in autonomy (Ushioda 1996; also, Dörnyei 2001a: 109–116), while her more recent work places Deci & Ryan's ideas about intrinsic motivation within a Vygotskyan framework in which social mediation and social environment come to the fore (Ushioda 2003, 2006). Ushioda also links motivation to self-regulation, arguing that 'self-regulated learning can occur only when the ability to control strategic thinking processes is accompanied by the wish to do so' (Ushioda 2006: 15). In sociocultural terms, this ability is mediated through processes of task-focused dialogical interaction involving cognitive and motivational 'scaffolding'. The key to these processes, she argues, is 'a social environment that supports learners' sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation to pursue optimal challenges through the zone of proximal development' (ibid.).

5.3 Individual differences and sociocultural approaches

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, advocates of autonomy in language learning were at pains to distance themselves from the idea that autonomy implies individualism, or learning in isolation. There are some indications, however, of a renewed focus on the individual in work on autonomy, influenced both by the resurgence of interest in 'individual differences' (Larsen-Freeman 2001; Robinson 2002; Dörnyei & Skehan 2003; Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford 2003; Jiménez-Raya & Lamb 2003b; Ellis 2004; Dörnyei 2005) and by an emphasis on individual learners in empirical work informed by the 'sociocultural' turn of recent years (Lantolf 2000, 2002; Block 2003; Zuengler & Miller 2006).

Although there is a clear conceptual link between autonomy and individual difference – the idea of autonomy responds to the fact that individual learners differ from each other and may seek to develop their individuality through divergent learning processes – there has been relatively little interaction between the two areas of research. This is in part because discussions of individual differences often work with taxonomies of psychological and social variables (such as age, affect, aptitude, cognitive style, personality, gender, ethnicity, social class and setting for learning) which tend to suppress, rather than highlight, individuality. Individual difference research, in other words, helps us to understand how psychological and social factors may influence learning processes and outcomes, but not how learners develop individual identities through language learning processes (Benson 2005). Somewhat paradoxically, sociocultural approaches have made a stronger contribution

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in this respect in spite of their emphasis on social dimension of language teaching and learning.

The most significant contribution of Oxford's (2003) revision to Benson's (1997) model of 'technical', 'psychological' and 'political' versions of autonomy is the addition of two 'sociocultural' perspectives: 'Sociocultural I', referring to approaches based on Vygotskyan learning theory (Lantolf 2000, Lantolf & Pavlenko 2001), which hold that all learning is situated in a particular 'social and cultural setting populated by specific individuals at a given historical time' (Oxford 2003: 86) and 'Sociocultural II', referring to work based on theories of 'situated learning' and 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002), and 'investment' and 'imagined communities' (Norton 2000; 2001). According to Oxford (2003: 87), this work 'emphasizes the context of autonomy rather than the individual exercising it', which suggests that its main contribution is to counter tendencies toward decontextualization and individualism in the autonomy literature. This is certainly true of its role in Little's (1999, 2000b) and Ushioda's (2003, 2006) work, based largely on Vygotsyan theory, which has elaborated a view of the development of autonomy through 'interdependent' and 'socially mediated' learning processes.

But the extent to which sociocultural approaches involve attention to learner individuality is often underplayed. In a recent paper entitled 'Learner autonomy as agency in sociocultural settings', for example, Toohey & Norton (2003: 65) refer to 'sociocultural perspectives on L2 learning that focus not so much on individuals as on how practices in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts afford or constrain the access of learners to community activities and thus to learning'. The empirical focus of the paper, on the other hand, falls on two individual learners. Individual case studies are, in fact, characteristic of much recent empirical work from sociocultural perspectives, which often provide considerable insight into the interaction between individual differences and autonomy (e.g. Lam 2000; Norton 2000, 2001; Toohey 2000; Lantolf & Pavlenko 2001; Teutsch-Dwyer 2001). The distinctive 'sociocultural' feature of much of this work lies, perhaps, in the way in which individuals are viewed as 'differentially positioned' (Toohey & Norton 2003: 65) within contexts of learning, rather than free, or potentially free, of their influence.

Agency and identity are the key linking concepts between sociocultural theory and the theory of autonomy, although Toohey & Norton (2003) unfortunately miss the opportunity to discuss the relationship of these concepts to autonomy. Although these terms are used in more than one way in the sociocultural literature, agency can perhaps be viewed as a point of origin for the development of autonomy, while identity might be viewed as one of its more important outcomes. Arguing against a dominant view of learners as 'processing devices' within SLA research and for a view of learners as 'people' with 'human agency', Lantolf & Pavlenko (2001: 145) state that as agents, 'learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning'. And according to Norton & Toohey (2002: 123), the goal of research on identity and language learning is 'to develop understandings of learners as both socially constructed and constrained but also as embodied, semiotic and emotional persons who identify themselves, resist identifications, and act on their social worlds'. Some of my own recent work has explored these perspectives on the development of autonomy as a long-term process through (auto)biographical research (Benson et al. 2003; Benson 2005). Contributions to Benson & Nunan (2002, 2005) also offer insight into relationships between agency, identity and autonomy within lifelong processes of learning (Block 2002; Brown 2002; He 2002; Lim 2002; Sakui 2002b) and shorter term involvements in courses of study (Barfield 2003; Cotterall 2005; Malcolm 2005). One of the more important themes to emerge from these studies is the extent to which the construction of individual identities and the achievement of personal autonomy are often interwoven in stories of long-term language learning experiences.

5.4 Teacher development

Teacher autonomy is one of the most significant, and problematic, concepts to have emerged from the field of autonomy in recent years. Several factors have contributed to its development, most notably the involvement of advocates of autonomy in teacher education in the mid-1990s. The idea was introduced into the language teaching literature by Allwright (1990) and later developed by Little (1995). Teacher autonomy appears to be understood some what differently in language teaching and broader educational contexts, where it primarily refers to teachers' freedom to exercise discretion in curriculum implementation. In the language teaching literature, there is a much greater emphasis on teacher autonomy as a professional attribute and the link between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy.

Early work on autonomy discussed changing teacher roles in new modes of practice such as self-access (see, for example, contributions to Benson & Voller 1997). The idea of teacher autonomy, on other hand, was related more to classroom contexts and, in Little (1995), to the idea that learner autonomy develops through pedagogical dialogues in which teachers exercise their own autonomy. Much of the language teaching literature treats teacher autonomy as a professional attribute, involving a capacity for self-directed professional development (Thavenius 1999;

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McGrath 2000; Smith 2001, 2003; Aoki 2002). There is also an understandable reluctance to divorce this attribute from teachers' ability and willingness to foster autonomy among their students. Aoki (2002: 111), for example, suggests that teacher autonomy could be defined by analogy with learner autonomy:

> If learner autonomy is the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own learning . . . teacher autonomy, by analogy, can be defined as the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching.

She finds this analogy problematic, however, 'because it does not imply in itself that teacher autonomy has any relevance to teachers' capacity to support the development of the autonomy of their learners'.

In the more recent literature, attention has also been paid to teacher freedom as a component of teacher autonomy. The shift of autonomy to classroom contexts has raised complex issues concerned with the teacher's role as mediator between educational authorities and students. Teachers' efforts to promote autonomy in the classroom are typically constrained by factors that are only variably subject to their control (Benson 2000; McCasland & Poole 2002; Carroll & Head 2003; Trebbi 2003, 2007; Vieira 2003). Benson (2000) argued that a self-critical approach to the ways in which teachers mediate these constraints in the classroom is crucial to teacher autonomy. More recent accounts of teacher autonomy have also tended to balance professional attributes and teacher freedom, with the latter often understood as an outcome of self-directed professional development and a willingness to engage in processes of institutional change beyond the walls of one's own classroom (Lamb 2000a; McGrath 2000; Barfield et al. 2002; Mackenzie 2002).

The literature on teacher autonomy also includes a number of interesting accounts of teacher education initiatives (Thavenius 1999; van Esch et al. 1999; Aoki 2002; Lamb 2000a; McGrath 2000; Schalkwijk et al. 2002; Aagård & St. John 2003; Kohonen 2003; Vieira 2003; Hacker & Barkhuizen 2007; Vieira et al. 2007). McGrath (2000) observes a convergence between the idea of teacher autonomy as 'self-directed professional development' and notions such as 'teacher research', 'reflective practice', 'action research', and 'teacher development'. But the idea of teacher autonomy comes out of the literature on learner autonomy and has not yet been widely discussed in the teacher education literature. In a recent paper on the 'sociocultural turn' in second language teacher education, however, Johnson (2006: 235) refers to the need for such education to sustain 'a teaching force of transformative intellectuals who can navigate their professional worlds in ways that enable them to create educationally sound, contextually appropriate, and socially equitable learning opportunities for the students they teach'. To the extent that this could reasonably be rephrased as 'a teaching force of autonomous teachers', there appears to be considerable scope for interaction between work on teacher autonomy and new conceptions of teachers and teaching in the wider literature.

6. Autonomy beyond language education

The remainder of this review discusses work on autonomy beyond the field of language education, in philosophy, social theory and the philosophy and sociology of education. This work deserves attention for two major reasons. First, our own interest in autonomy as language teachers and researchers is conditioned by a much wider interest in the relevance of autonomy to a variety of domains of social life. Second, issues of debate in the literature on autonomy in language education are also present within a wider, but largely unacknowledged, literature on autonomy, the individual and the self. In other words, there is a great deal to be learned from this literature, both in relation to the theory and practice of autonomy in language learning and in relation to the wider social significance of our specific interests in autonomy.

6.1 The individual in modern society

The idea of learner autonomy is rooted in 18th- and 19th-century European philosophical writings on society and the individual, notably those of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Although these roots are seldom explicitly referenced, there are at least two senses in which the idea of learner autonomy is related to European conceptions of a democratic society founded on the exercise of individual autonomy and respect for the autonomy of others. Viewed as an educational goal, learner autonomy implies a particular kind of socialization involving the development of attributes and values that will permit individuals to play active, participatory roles in a democratic society. In a second sense, this ideal society also serves as a metaphor for the autonomous classroom or school. In Western contexts at least, the argument that a commitment to autonomy in education pushes democratic societies to take their democratic ideals seriously is a strong one (Benson 2007). On the other hand, as critics such as Pennycook (1997), Holliday (2003, 2005) and Schmenk (2005) have pointed out, the universal relevance of 18th- and 19th-century European philosophical conceptions of the individual and society to diverse educational systems around the world should not be taken for granted.

In order to make sense of these issues, it is important to note that interest in the philosophical concept of autonomy has never been as intense in Western contexts as it is at the present time (see, for example, Berofsky 1995; Lehrer 1997; Schneewind 1998; Clarke 1999; Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000a;

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Cuypers 2001; Paul, Miller & Paul 2003; Santoro 2003). This means, perhaps, that we should be less concerned with historical conceptions of autonomy than with ways in which they are currently being appropriated and re-interpreted in contemporary philosophical and social debates. Atkins's (2005) reader is a useful introduction to European Enlightenment philosophies of the individual and their late-twentieth-century post-modern critics (see also, Porter 1997; Badmington 2000). Gergen's (1991) work on the psychology of personal identity (discussed in Straub, Zielke & Werbik 2005) is representative of the post-modern critique. It argues that globalization has led to an increase in the direct and indirect relationships among individuals, resulting in 'social saturation', or the 'population of the self' with the views and orientations of others. Individual identities have thus become multi-layered and characterized by a polyphony of inner voices, imaginary relationships and internal dialogues, to the point that 'the fully saturated self becomes no self at all' (Gergen 1991: 7). From Butler's (1990: 16) feminist perspective, 'the presumption that identities are self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent' is inherently problematic. Recent feminist work on autonomy has, however, been far more concerned with the ways in which the attributes of the autonomous individual are linked to essentially male values of independence, self-sufficiency and separation from others, to the neglect of female values of dependence and care. Mackenzie & Stoljar (2000a: 7), for example, suggest that the problem with autonomy lies in the 'the prescriptive conclusion that the goal of human life is the realization of self-sufficiency and individuality'.

For Mackenzie & Stoljar, it is important that feminist critiques have never rejected the concept of autonomy outright. This holds out the possibility of a refigured conception of 'relational autonomy', in which notions of the related self are foundational. In this conception, 'political autonomy', involving essentially public freedoms and rights, receives less emphasis than 'personal autonomy', involving more private deliberations, decisions and actions. This focus on the private or personal domain leads to an emphasis on 'autonomy competencies' (Meyers 1989) and the ways in which oppressive socialization may impede their development. Mackenzie (2000: 144) also emphasizes the importance of imaginative activities to the development of self-conceptions guided by critical reflection on what matters to oneself, and the ways in which the 'cultural imaginary', or the available images in a society, may impair women's abilities to 'imagine themselves otherwise'.

Straub et al. (2005: 326) also reject the association of autonomy with conceptions of the 'substantive', self-contained individual, arguing that autonomy is necessarily constrained in modern societies: 'At best, there is autonomy for people whose personal and biographical development is determined by countless contingencies'. But in response to Gergen (1991), they also argue that, in the face of the fragmentation of substantive identities, 'self-determined intentions, decisions and action presuppose 'knowledge' of who one is (has become) and who one wants to be' (Straub et al. 2005: 330). Because this knowledge is primarily constructed through self-narratives, they argue, a post-modern theory of autonomous personality depends upon a theory of narrative identity. From this perspective, autonomy is not grounded in substantive individual identities, but in identities that become individual through narratives involving self-reflection and self-thematization.

The literature discussed in this section represents only the tip of the iceberg of current debates on autonomy, which also include vigorous attempts to refine and strengthen 18th- and 19th-century conceptions of autonomy in the face of recent critiques and discussions of autonomy in domains such as genetics, bioethics and the law (see, for example, contributions to Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000b; Paul et al. 2003). The point I want to draw attention to, however, is simply that growing interest in autonomy in language teaching and learning is situated within a much wider context of concern about the nature and role of individual autonomy in a 'globalized', 'post-modern world'. In this context, new philosophical conceptions of autonomy are also emerging with the potential to inform the development of autonomy as a language learning concept. There are clear links, for example, between the feminist notion of relational autonomy and approaches to autonomy in language learning that emphasize interdependence over independence. The notion of narrative identity as a ground for individual autonomy also has value for work on the development of autonomy through long-term experiences of language learning.

6.2 Education policy and reform

Renewed interest in autonomy in the philosophy of education has led to several publications that have tended to cover similar ground to the philosophical literature discussed above (e.g. Bridges 1997; Winch 2006). There has also been some interest in autonomy and related issues in the sociology of education in literature related to global and national policy development. In these contexts, the term autonomy most often occurs in discussions of parental choice and the deregulation of schools (Whitty 1997; Berka 2000). Although discussion of school autonomy in market-driven systems goes beyond the scope of this review, it does raise interesting questions about the ways in which control over learning is distributed among a number of stakeholders in schooling: principals, teachers, parents, learners and others.

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While the literature on learner autonomy has conventionally prioritized learner control, work on teacher autonomy suggests that teachers also have rights in regard to autonomy, and the same may be true of schools in relation to wider systems. Although there has been little consideration of this dimension of autonomy in language education contexts, Mackenzie (2002) has made a start by encouraging us to view institutions as bodies with the potential to learn from initiatives taken by their teachers.

The idea of autonomy has also played a broader role in education reform initiatives around the world. The globalization of educational policy, often involving uncritical transfer of policy from nation to nation, leading to increased homogeneity among national policies, is well-documented (Jarvis 2000; Mundy 2005; Wiseman & Baker 2005; Zajda 2005). Several writers have commented on the centrality of the idea of individuality within globalized educational policy. According to Mundy (2005: 8), for example, educational convergence in the late 20th century 'helped produce a world culture that embedded such common ideas and institutions as citizenship, equality, individualism and progress in territorially defined nation-states', while Wiseman & Baker (2005: 85) also comment that 'the Western "myth of the individual," where the source of value and change is the individual, provides the model framework for schooling around the world'. Although this focus on the individual corresponds to the Western philosophical ideal of autonomy, the forces driving policy change tend to be informed by the economic principle 'that the education of individuals can influence national economic growth and has contributed significantly to the economic development of nations' (ibid.). Ecclestone (2002) paints a similar picture, in the context of a discussion of autonomy in UK vocational education, of a policy level interest in 'lifelong learning' driven by the perception that the best chance of economic survival for an economy 'at risk' from forces of globalization lies in investment in the education of individuals.

The implications of the globalization of education policy for the theory and practice of autonomy in language learning deserve more attention than they have received to date. Three points can be made here. First, global education reforms form an important part of the context for the growing interest in autonomy that has been a persistent theme in this review. Recent reviews of language education policy in East Asia point to a tendency for increased foreign language teaching provision (especially in ELT) to be accompanied by a shift towards communicative and task-based approaches to classroom learning and the use of self-access and CALL facilities (Nunan 2003; Ho 2004; Poole 2005). The number of contributions from writers working in Asian settings reviewed in this paper are an indication that growing interest in autonomy in language learning has a global dimension, and in part arises from a need to respond to large-scale educational reform initiatives potentially favouring practices associated with autonomy. Second, the theory and practice of autonomy in language learning has itself been globalized, through conferences, consultancies and publications. Those who question the appropriateness of autonomy to non-Western educational settings are perhaps responding as much to the processes through which autonomy is packaged as 'universal' educational value, as they are to the concept of autonomy itself.

Lastly, we must also acknowledge that the initiative in larger scale experiments in learner autonomy can easily slip out of the hands of teachers who are responsible for their day-to-day implementation. In UK higher education, for example, Allwright's (1988: 35) 'radical restructuring of language pedagogy' has become the norm, although not for the reasons that early advocates of autonomy may have wished. The proliferation of self-access centres in the 1990s was motivated by a complex combination of economic, technological and educational concerns and presented both opportunities and dilemmas for teachers favouring autonomy. Hurd's (1998: 219) account of the process mentions how 'many lecturers interpreted the call to push ahead with autonomy as a criticism of current practice and a ploy to reduce teaching staff', while those who saw the potential for fostering autonomy worked under difficult conditions in under-resourced centres where tasks were harnessed to fixed assessment goals. In some cases, Hurd notes, there were actually too many students for the available facilities: 'if some students were not remiss in carrying out their center-based self-access language work, centers would not be able to cope' (p. 229). Schalkwijk et al. (2002) paint a somewhat similar picture of a national level attempt in the late 1990s to transform Netherlands secondary schools into 'independent study houses' (Studiehuis), which provoked parental resistance and a student strike in the first year of implementation. They attribute resistance to the Studiehuis initiative to its 'top-down' implementation and to teachers' lack of preparedness and familiarity with the principles of autonomy in learning. Problematic experiments in autonomy such as these, which are probably more frequent than the number of reports in the literature suggests, perhaps indicate that autonomy in language learning works best when it flows from the needs and desires of students and teachers themselves.

7. Conclusion

The reasons behind the growing interest in autonomy in language learning that I have attempted to document in this review are difficult to pin down. The most important underlying factor is clearly the continuing worldwide growth in the language teaching industry, ELT especially, which involves

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both the spread of 'communicative' principles and the deconstruction of conventional classroom processes. While these developments were characteristic of European language teaching in the 1980s and 1990s, they are a relatively recent arrival in many other parts of the world. Indeed, the recent literature on autonomy has an important international dimension, witnessed by many contributions from ELT researchers based in Asia and Latin America.

Growing interest in autonomy in European ELT and modern language teaching, on the other hand, probably has more to do with the emergence of critical perspectives on language teaching and learning as a social process, marked also by interest in sociocultural theory. Significantly, autonomy is yet to have any great impact on North American language education, where sociocultural theory is strongest. Autonomy and sociocultural theory could be viewed as alternative poles of attraction for critical student-centred research and practice – the one focusing on the individual and the other on social context. As we have seen, however, the theory of autonomy does, in fact, view language teaching and learning as a social process, while sociocultural theory pays considerable attention to the individual in empirical work. It is to be hoped, then, that interaction between autonomy and sociocultural theory will develop in years to come.

Contrasting the theoretical literature published since the turn of the century with earlier work, we might also point to a tendency to adopt a more distanced perspective on the concept of autonomy. For many years, research on autonomy was a somewhat specialized and self-contained field, characterized by a tendency towards advocacy. Researchers also tended to view the refinement of the concept of autonomy as a defence against the dangers of popularization. In the more recent literature, there is a much greater tendency to view autonomy as a problematic concept that can be represented in a variety of ways. The boundaries of autonomy as a field have also become more porous as researchers have begun to explore relationships between autonomy and other student-focused constructs such as self-regulation, self-motivation, agency and identity. These developments have much to do with the growth of interest in autonomy within language education as a whole. As Hedge's (2000) and Kumaravadivelu's (2003) contributions to the wider literature indicate, future research may be far more concerned with the development of perspectives on language education in which autonomy is viewed as an important, but not the only important, guiding principle.

Lastly, it has to be acknowledged that the empirical knowledge base on autonomy in language learning remains somewhat weak. This is in part due to the tendency in the earlier literature towards advocacy, which led to an overriding concern to produce evidence for the effectiveness of initiatives designed to help learners become more autonomous. In this respect there has been a definite shift towards more critical examination, often qualitative in nature, of the ways in which learners and teachers respond to such initiatives and of the ways in which learner and teacher autonomy develop in the longer term across contexts of teaching and learning. The view that autonomy is a contextually-variable construct provides the ground for such research. The challenge for the future is, perhaps, to move beyond this essentially theoretical proposition towards an empirically-grounded understanding of the ways in which autonomy and the potential for autonomy vary according to factors such as age, gender, cultural context and setting.

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