Language Learning Journal, June 1998, No 17, 70–74

"Too carefully led or too carelessly left alone"?

Stella Hurd
Open University

INTRODUCTION

The growth in numbers in higher education over the last few years and the subsequent change in student profile to incorporate more mature students have resulted in a greater recognition of differing motivations and aspirations and an increasing emphasis on notions of learner diversity and learner choice. The impact of these changes has been felt across the board, but particularly in language departments where it is generally agreed that students learn best in small groups. A common response to the requirement to 'do more for less' has been the introduction of self-access elements into new or existing courses, particularly on institution-wide language programmes, and, in some cases, on degree programmes as well. Autonomous learning as an integral part of taught programmes has become an increasingly popular option for language departments eager to maximise their diminishing resources.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY AUTONOMY?

The many implications of a shift towards autonomy underline the need for a clear consensus of what it actually means and how it can impact on the teaching and learning process. While theorists hold differing views on the interpretation of autonomy in relation to learning, there seems to be general agreement over one crucial point, the central role of the teacher in the autonomous learning process. Little (1991, 4), along with many others writing in this field, talks of autonomy in terms of a 'capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action'. This is unlikely to be effectively realised without teacher intervention and guidance and can manifest itself in a number of different ways. Holec (1981, 3) goes a great deal further. Not only is autonomy a capacity, but it is also 'the ability to take charge of one's learning' which is a skill 'to be acquired by 'natural' means or in a systematic, deliberate way.' Holec puts learners clearly and unambiguously at the centre of their own learning. They alone are responsible for deciding what is to be learned, when, how, in what order and by what means. It is also their responsibility to set their own goals and measure the degree to which they have been effective in attaining them. This is the extreme end of learner autonomy. Holec (1985, 189) is interested primarily in adapting the teaching to the learner and not the learner to the teaching, but is against any notion of imposition of teaching or learning method or approach, seeing it as a 'contradiction in educational terms.' In other words, you cannot compel people to be autonomous, if at the same time you wish to maintain notions of choice and freedom in learning, and a recognition of the diversity of learners' needs and abilities. Holec does not, however, find the teacher's role redundant, even if his or her presence is not, in itself, a reliable standard by which to evaluate the degree to which a learner is autonomous. It is the teacher's responsibility to help learners achieve that state of independence, to act as counsellor, helper and facilitator, while recognising that as learner expertise increases, teacher involvement inevitably decreases.

"This is unlikely to be effectively realised without teacher intervention"

Autonomous learning does not, therefore, imply a situation in which anything goes, nor one of total detachment which, as Little (1991, 5) points out, is a 'principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism.' It is not simply a matter of teachers setting up tasks and from then on ignoring their students until assessment time. Self-access packages or open learning programmes say nothing about autonomy in themselves. Indeed many are successfully used in a classroom context. It is what the learner brings to the learning process and the learning materials which not only determines his or her degree of autonomy, but is also often a measure of learning success. The 'capacity' to learn autonomously develops from a state of self-awareness and willingness to take an active part. In order for learners to

achieve this state, teachers must also play their part. It is no easy option for either side.

HOW DO TEACHERS UNDERSTAND AUTONOMY IN TERMS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE?

A study at a new university in 1994 revealed differing interpretations of autonomy and its role in the teaching and learning process. A difficulty arose when attempting to determine its limits and possibilities and relate them to practical situations. While some talked of autonomy in the same terms as Holec or Little as a capacity for self-direction or an ability to take charge, others saw it more in the context of self-access packages linked to classwork, with clear instructions for use. Tutors were not agreed on whether autonomous language learning entailed working on your own exclusively, or whether it could be extended to working in groups independently of the teacher.

Most of the respondents talked about the kind of autonomous learning that takes place in a designated centre, as opposed to project work or homework which can usually take place anywhere. It was this type of learning, referred to as 'directed' independent learning that required a significant input from tutors in terms of setting it up, monitoring its use and assessing its value. Additional tasks of inducting students into how to make best use of the facilities, getting feedback and dealing with problems all contributed to demands on time, which for many were seen as unrealistic. Getting the message over to students that this was a requirement and not an optional extra was a particularly acute problem. Assessment was considered by some to be the most effective way of getting students to do the work, given their predominantly instrumental attitude to learning.

The view of some that it is only those at more advanced levels who can really benefit is not uncommon and is generally based on the idea that the more language learning you do, the better you become at learning, that the process of learning a language is intrinsically bound up with the process of learning to learn. The research carried out by Rowsell and Libben (1994, 681) looked at the learning behaviour of high and low achievers on autonomous language learning schemes to ascertain what distinguished them, and concluded that 'it is the learners' approach to the meaningful use of language rather than their approach to the organisation of pedagogical tasks that distinguishes between high and low achievement.' While they were able to produce evidence to show that high achievers make better independent learners, it does not follow that *ab initio* students do not, given the right support. High achievers will all have been beginners in the language originally. Those at lower levels may need more initial help and guidance but there was no evidence to show that they achieved lower results within their thresholds than advanced learners.

Advantages for the learner centred around the availability of a wide range of language materials to access through different media, choice and the opportunity to concentrate on areas of weakness in a non-threatening environment. This was also seen to be more satisfying and empowering. In reality, those on a programme with an autonomous learning element have more limited choice than those who can simply 'use' their Centre in whatever way suits them best. Nevertheless, these students who are, paradoxically, compelled to work autonomously and consequently have to find ways of coping, are more likely to develop effective language learning strategies in order to complete their independent tasks in the time available. It was felt that unfocused autonomy was likely to lead to a great deal of time-wasting and frustrated effort, but the general view was that, provided the necessary support structures are in place, there are few, if any disadvantages for learners.

"unfocused autonomy was likely to lead to a great deal of time-wasting"

For teachers, too, there was much to gain. On the practical side, pooling of resources and ideas and collaboration over the development of materials could lead to a more stimulating and rewarding working environment, a gradual reduction in work load as more and more materials became available and a more equal and satisfying relationship with students. On the minus side, autonomous learning was difficult to manage and monitor, and enormously time-consuming.

There was general agreement on the urgent need for staff development and learner training. These were seen to be of paramount importance as the key factors in successful autonomous learning. This bears out the research findings of psychologists Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) and educationists with a particular interest in autonomous learning – Davies (1987), Gathercole (1990), Dickinson (1992), Little (1991) and Holec (1985) – that students need help initially in acquiring the necessary skills if they are to make any headway in autonomous mode,

> 'Learner training aims to provide learners with the alternatives from which they can make informed choices about *what, why, how, when* and *where* they learn. This is not to say they *have* to make all these decisions all of the time.' (Dickinson 1992, 13)

Nevertheless, it was considered very important that learners be made to recognise their responsibilities and not encouraged to think that autonomous language learning could be interpreted as opting out if you felt like it. A designated member of staff for each language was suggested as an important stage in implementing an effective autonomous language learning programme. He or she would have the dual function of helping students and feeding back to

languages staff. In order to train learners, teachers also needed training,

> 'In a system where the learner assumes responsibility for his learning whilst still learning how to do so, where the teaching is centred on giving support to the learner, the teacher himself must also redefine his role by reference to this focusing on the learner and his learning.' (Holec 1981, 24)

However, the likelihood of adequate staff development and learner training taking place was seen to be minimal. Staff could not be forced to attend training sessions. These would therefore inevitably become sessions where presenter periodically preached to the converted. Training in the use of technology was also set to remain piecemeal and fragmentary, owing to constraints on time and budgets. Depressingly, it was likely to remain the case that a few enthusiasts would attempt against all odds, to keep the issues alive and hope gradually to persuade unconvinced staff of the benefits, through informal discussion, demonstration of good practice and increased participation in research projects.

PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES

There are reasonable grounds to believe that, given time, institutional support, adequate resourcing and staff development, autonomous language learning as part of a taught programme can have many distinct advantages for both the teacher and learner. Nevertheless, it would seem that, realistically, only a partial autonomy can be exercised by students in a university context, precisely because the goals and objectives are already in place before a student enrols. Given the diversity of students' aspirations, needs and abilities, the variety of learning styles and the range of personal expectations, this is no bad thing. A degree of autonomy is certainly desirable. However, that same diversity dictates that total autonomy would be counter-productive for many students, in particular those who are unused or unwilling to self-direct in other areas of their lives and those who find it stressful, if not impossible, to relinquish the role of passive recipient in the teaching and learning process. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991, 5) remind us that while most teachers would no longer support the idea of teacher as "fountain of expert knowledge" and "learner as recipient of teacher's wisdom", there is a danger in adopting an over-permissive approach to learning. They cite Rogers whose writings 'give form to the belief that the right psychological conditions will produce a flowering of the individual', but highlight the dangers: 'A diffuse concern for the learner arising perhaps out of a mixed-up sentimentality does not generate these conditions; neither does the *laissez-faire* approach created when people think they can go along with these ideas without fully understanding them.' They see learning as a skill which can itself be learned and that leaving students entirely to their own devices to 'discover' is doing them a gross disservice.

"the degree of autonomy needs to be clearly understood"

On a practical level, language teachers need to target those areas of language learning which are particularly suitable for an autonomous approach. There is a general consensus around the suitability of autonomous learning packages for remedial grammar work to enable students having difficulty over a specific language point to work at their own pace and repeat as often as necessary. Pronunciation and intonation practice through imitating models of good practice is also an appropriate activity for outside the classroom. The effectiveness of autonomous learning for receptive tasks also tends to meet with general acceptance. One of the strengths of a Resource Centre is the variety of materials it can house that are suitable for reading and listening activities. There is, however, a pressing need for research to be carried out to determine how much 'new' learning students can cope with on their own. Randall and Scott (1992, 361) were unable to conclude from their survey of university students on a 1st-semester French course whether it was possible to learn and apply grammar rules on your own. What they did discover, however, was that students showed 'a marked inability to read and learn linguistic structures which are formed with function words,' for example relative pronouns. A much higher rate of success was demonstrated in tests using "content-based" linguistic structures, such as *ne...personne*. They concluded that teachers need to 'begin by identifying linguistic structures in terms of their function or content' and 'designate the linguistic structures which can be learned outside the class'.

Preparation for or follow-up to classroom work is considered by many to be an appropriate activity for students to tackle on their own. However, if it is not to be indistinguishable from 'set homework' the degree of autonomy needs to be clearly understood. For example, asking students to watch the news in the target language and prepare a résumé of a news item of their choice involves some autonomy; stating which news item to watch and exactly what to do with it does not. In the same way, directing students to a particular self-correcting language learning package is not asking them to exercise autonomy, merely to follow instructions. On the other hand, giving out information on the range of materials available and help in how to get the most from them is undoubtedly encouraging students to act autonomously. It is breaking what Riley (1976, 79) has called the 'addiction' to classes, needing the weekly 'fix' of the language. He maintains that "any activity which can be done inside a classroom with a teacher can be done outside without one" (Riley, 1976, 88). Nevertheless, if learners are not trained for autonomy, no amount of surrounding them with resources will foster in them that capacity for active involvement and conscious choice,