

# **Learner autonomy: drawing together the threads of self-assessment, goal-setting and reflection**

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## **Learner autonomy: a working definition**

The concept of learner autonomy has been central to the Council of Europe's thinking about language teaching and learning since 1979, when Henri Holec wrote *Autonomy and foreign language learning* (cited here as Holec 1981). Holec began by defining learner autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", noting that this ability "is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way", and pointing out that "*To take charge of one's learning* is to have [...] the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning [...]" (Holec 1981, p.3).

Holec's report was a contribution to the Council of Europe's work in adult education, which sought to promote the learner's freedom "by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives" (ibid., p.1). When learner autonomy is one of its defining goals, adult education

becomes an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man "product of his society", one moves to the idea of man "producer of his society". (Janne 1977, p.3; cit. Holec 1981, p.1)

Learner autonomy, in other words, belongs together with the idea that one of the functions of (adult) education is to equip learners to play an active role in participatory democracy. That is why it remains central to the Council of Europe's educational concerns.

## **Implications of this definition of learner autonomy**

We take our first step towards developing the ability to take charge of our own learning when we accept full responsibility for the learning process, acknowledging that success in learning depends crucially on ourselves rather than on other people. This acceptance of responsibility entails that we set out to learn, "in a systematic, deliberate way" (Holec 1981, p.3), the skills of reflection and analysis that enable us to plan, monitor and evaluate our learning. But accepting responsibility for our own learning is not only a matter of gradually developing metacognitive mastery of the learning process. It has an equally important affective dimension: in their commitment to self-management and their generally proactive approach, autonomous learners are motivated learners. What is more, Holec's definition entails that autonomous learners can freely apply their knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning.

## **Learner autonomy and the ELP**

According to the *Principles and Guidelines* that define the ELP and its functions (Council of Europe 2000/2004), the ELP reflects the Council of Europe's concern with "the development of the language learner", which by implication includes the development of learning skills, and "the development of the capacity for independent language learning"; the ELP, in other words, "is a tool to promote learner autonomy". The *Principles and Guidelines* insist that the ELP is the property of the individual learner, which in itself implies learner autonomy. Learners exercise their ownership not simply through physical possession, but by using the

ELP to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning. In this, self-assessment plays a central role: the ongoing, formative self-assessment that is supported by the “can do” checklists attached to the language biography, and the periodic, summative self-assessment of the language passport, which is related to the so-called self-assessment grid in the CEF (Council of Europe 2001, pp.26–27).

### **Learner autonomy and the CEF**

The CEF does not concern itself with learner autonomy as such. However, learner autonomy is implied by the concept of *savoir-apprendre* (“ability to learn”), which the CEF defines as “the ability to observe and participate in new experience and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary” (Council of Europe 2001, p.106). When the CEF tells us that “ability to learn has several components, such as language and communication awareness; general phonetic skills; study skills; and heuristic skills” (CEF, pp.107), we may be prompted to recall the ways in which the ELP can support the development of reflective learning skills.

### **Why is learner autonomy important?**

According to a large body of empirical research in social psychology, autonomy – “feeling free and volitional in one’s actions” (Deci 1995, p.2) – is a basic human need. It is nourished by, and in turn nourishes, our intrinsic motivation, our proactive interest in the world around us. This explains how learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation: autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation. Precisely because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective (conversely, all learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous). And the efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom

### **Autonomy in formal language learning**

In formal educational contexts, learner autonomy entails reflective involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating learning. But note that language learning depends crucially on language use: we can learn to speak only by speaking, to read only by reading, and so on. Thus in formal language learning, the scope of learner autonomy is always constrained by what the learner can *do* in the target language; in other words, the scope of our autonomy as language learners is partly a function of the scope of our autonomy as target language users.

The development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles:

- *learner involvement* – engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (the affective and the metacognitive dimensions);
- *learner reflection* – helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (the metacognitive dimensions);
- *appropriate target language use* – using the target language as the principal medium of language learning (the communicative and the metacognitive dimensions).

### **What does the teacher do?**

According to these three principles the teacher should

- use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and require the same of her learners;
- involve her learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analysed and evaluated with the whole class – in the target language, to begin with in very simple terms;
- help her learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation – again, in the target language;
- require her learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups;
- require her learners to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce;
- engage her learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class – in the target language.

### **References**

Council of Europe, 2000/2004: *European Language Portfolio (ELP): Principles and Guidelines. With added explanatory notes*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. (DGIV/EDU/LANG (2000) 33 rev.1)

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