Getting Learners Actively Involved

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Introduction

Studies in learner strategies, motivation and attitude toward language learning have always found systematic attention in the field of second language acquisition and, in particular, in second language classroom research. Especially in recent years, the need to be prepared to interact, live and succeed in a globalized world on one side and the fact of being immersed in technologically enhanced multimedia contexts – which make globalization approachable to almost anyone – on the other side, seem to have opened new domains of research in language learning. In all this, Learner Autonomy, with its focus on learner reflection and taking responsibility for one's own learning processes, is an aspect more and more frequently recurring.

The main idea which lies under the concept of Learner Autonomy is that if pupils are involved in decision making processes regarding their own language competence, they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning and, as a consequence, new language knowledge can be more focused and purposeful for them. Since Holec (1981: 3) gave his first definition, more than thirty year have passed, dozens of books have been written, hundreds of studies have been realized. Nonetheless, the term 'Learner Autonomy' is still producing considerable controversy, up to the point that both linguists and educationalists have failed to reach a consensus as to what autonomy really is. What seems generally acknowledged is that its development in language classrooms depends on pupils' being involved in making decisions about their own learning and that this process calls for a change in student and teacher roles, for a transfer of certain responsibilities from the teacher to the learner. However, how to favour this process can still cause perplexities or lead to misinterpretations, as Little notes:

> Stories abound of teachers who, inspired by the ideal of learner autonomy, have interpreted this argument too literally, telling their learners that it is now up to them to be responsible for their learning and withdrawing to a corner of the classroom in order to manage the resources that will magically facilitate 30 or more individual learning processes. When nothing happens the teacher usually concludes that autonomy does not work (Little 1995: 178).

These are clearly cases of errors of concept transfer from learning theory to teaching practice, two operational levels which still need to be combined to a greater extent and degree. Indeed, as many experts in the field have said (Little 1995; Dam 2002; Smith 2003; La Ganza 2008; Lamb and Reinders 2008), it is rather demanding for teachers to develop a sense of autonomy in their students unless they have experienced it themselves either as learners or in teacher training courses specifically oriented to an exploratory and evaluative approach to learning and teaching. However, being aware of the fact that the majority of school systems around the world still base their pedagogy on the traditional teacher-fronted transmission of knowledge, it can be assumed that teachers neither have experienced Learner Autonomy during their own school learning nor they have received specific teacher training on it, even though Learner Autonomy is a regularly recurring concept in worldwide school policy and curriculum.

The point goes to a persistent and unanimously desired aim: *Getting learners actively involved* – which is, not accidentally, the title of this collection of essays.

Convinced that teachers should not be asked to help their students to be autonomous unless they are given tools, strategies, suggestions to be able to give that kind of support, the present Volume seeks to contribute to the need for providing interpretation keys to data coming from empirical research and, at the same time, sharing some experimental and successful approaches to the development of language learner autonomy. Moreover, the aim of this Volume is to expand knowledge on research and action-research on language learner autonomy, conceivably inspiring further investigation on concepts intrinsically connected to this topic, such as 'motivation', 'self-efficacy', 'learner strategies', 'self-reflection', as well as on the use of specific autonomous tools and tasks to be included in the curriculum.

Finally, we cannot ignore the fact that not only does research on learner autonomy in language learning focus on classroom learning, but there is also a growing interest on what happens beyond the language classroom in order to find out significant ways to help students make the most of the opportunities that the linguistic environment offers. Hence, even in out-of-school contexts language teachers have a crucial role to play in fostering Learner Autonomy, trying to support pupils in connecting out-of-class and in-class perspectives.

Being directed toward the same goal, i.e. 'getting learners actively involved', all the factors cited so far have found room in the present book, whose ambition has been to include contributions (1) reporting experiences with subjects of different ages, from young learners to adults and (2) give voice both to researchers and teachers, in certain cases with action-research projects, because academic investigations cannot be accomplished if teachers do not make data collection available, thus allowing experimentations to be meaningful for real classroom use, and, similarly, teachers themselves need academic support in order to have knowledge of research findings, of what works and how to possibly bring innovative (though realistic) tips into their classrooms.

Each section of the Volume aspires to be representative of one domain interrelating with the topic of the book: research, curriculum, strategies and knowledge transfer. Hence, the opening section, '**Researching language learner autonomy**', contains empirical studies carried out with the intention to display the results of some experimental learner autonomy oriented approaches. In particular, Lienhard Legenhausen reports significant data resulting from a research project where an autonomous classroom and a traditional one have been compared in terms of quality of interactions and accuracy level. Aiming to make her lessons more learner centred, Donna Clarke initiated an action research project and, in her paper, she presents the way learner autonomy has been developed and perceived by her adolescent students. Another example of action research is that proposed by Irina Minakova, whose students seem to have benefitted from learner autonomy oriented strategies, both regarding language performance and attitude. In the same way, Luc Geiller gives evidence of students' autonomous reactions to the activities proposed by means of press articles, within his project focused on the impact of reading in self-directed language learning. Finally, Hideo Kojima moves on a twofold level of autonomy development, presenting a study which shows how teacher's professional autonomy can be increased together with her/his students' autonomy.

The second section of the Volume, '**Language learner autonomy in the curriculum**', aims to relate theories and models of Learner Autonomy to the practice of daily classroom situations. The first paper is written by Leni Dam, who, starting from her long autonomy oriented teaching experience, suggests some useful and practical guide lines to foster the development of language learner autonomy, sharing common concerns and proposing ideas for solutions. What follows is the model of learner autonomy discussed by Anna Uhl Chamot, who emphasizes how learning strategies and differentiated instruction can be practically incorporated within that model in order to help less effective learners identify specific techniques to succeed in learning goals independently. Strategy education is the pivotal point in the contribute given by Luciano Mariani as well: here, intercultural communication

strategies are presented as fundamental techniques which can assist students to appropriately face, both linguistically and cognitively, any target language situation they may experience. Finally, the study of Naghamana Ali shows how it is possible to reinterpret curricular factors (as learner, teacher, subject matter and milieu) in light of learner autonomy, thus promoting an autonomous classroom climate and enhancing that autonomy students already own at different levels.

The third section of the Volume '**Tools for self-reflection in language learner autonomy**', goes into more depth, considering in particular metacognitive strategies and pedagogical instruments to be used either by teachers or students in order to promote effective learning. David Little considers the reflective use of some tools (like logbooks, posters, intentional learning activities and creative text production) as ways to develop language proficiency, pondering the role of reflection and inner speech in proficiency development. Moving on a common ground, Fabrizia Del Vecchio presents the role of instructional and collective scaffolding as strategic competence in an ESP task-based learning setting and its perceived effects on (meta)cognition by the participants. Andrés Canga Alonso focuses his attention on the degree of learner involvement, competence acquisition and self-reflection, which may be reached by students with the use of portfolio, a tool which implies such capacities as content selecting and learning self-assessing. Besides the portfolio, Luisa Bozzo presents additional online materials and tools (among the others: learning-style interview, pre-task guidelines, self-editing checklist, peer review guidelines, logbook, self-assessment grid), which have been conceived to stimulate students' cognitive and metacognitive competencies through reflection. Christine Tiefenthal finally proposes some practical individualized and mixed forms of feedback (oral, visualized or written feedback given by either peers or the teacher) aimed to support language learning in autonomous classroom context.

The fourth and last section of the Volume regards knowledge transfer: '**Connecting in and out-of-class language learner autonomy**'. The paper written by Tanya McCarthy describes how reflexive practices and tools typically employed in one-to-one advising situations can be used as support structures to encourage students to think more deeply on their strengths and weaknesses in language learning both inside and outside classroom learning. Marcella Menegale discusses the necessity to promote learner/language/learning awareness in order to help students recognize the learning opportunities they daily encounter in and beyond the language classroom and be able to apply knowledge transfer. The closing paper is that of Annamaria Cacchione, who deals with mobile ICTs and social media as educational resources, reporting a project where a mobile app has been created and used as a means of supporting students' language learning.

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