

## *SPECIAL ISSUE COMMENTARY*

### **LEARNER AUTONOMY AND NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

The areas of autonomy and technology in language education have a potentially very close but in practice often also uneasy relationship. In a narrow sense, technology is a tool that helps learners and educators to achieve certain educational goals. Autonomy can be one of those goals. But it can also in itself be an instrument towards the achievement of other educational goals. Process and product often get confused, especially when talking about the influence of technology on the development of autonomy. In the 1990s, for example, a common argument for the use of technology in the language classroom was that technology (e.g., the Internet) would give learners access to authentic examples of the target language and *thus* ‘increase’ their autonomy. We now better understand that unrestricted access to information, without proper guidance and feedback, can in fact inhibit learners from taking more responsibility (Murray, 1999), and thus developing themselves as autonomous learners.

Further confusion arises from the inconsistent use of the term autonomy. Although there is general agreement on the meaning of the term as learners’ ability to take charge of their own learning (Holec 1981), in practice it is unclear whether this involves or overlaps with such learner differences as motivation, metacognitive awareness and affect, and—perhaps more importantly—it is unclear how this can (and indeed should) be operationalized. How can we ‘measure’ autonomy? How do we know what impact instructional interventions have on learners’ autonomy, and how in turn do changes therein affect learning outcomes? Partly as a result of this confusion, there is a dearth of empirical studies in the area of autonomy. Claiming that participating in online chat with native speakers outside of the classroom empowers learners may well be true, but if and how that is related to language learning is unclear; even if it can be shown that learners interact more when given access to chat facilities, is this because they feel ‘in charge of their own learning’, or is it because they simply enjoy speaking more with people of their own age? To an extent such variables can be isolated, but on the whole autonomy has been treated and researched as a set of ‘learner-internal affordances’, which collectively impact on learning. So autonomy is a bit like art; we can’t agree on its definition, but all seem to know what it is. However, recognizing autonomous learning when we see it is one thing, understanding how we can better encourage it, and the role of technology in this, is another.

Technology has the potential to not only provide access to resources for learning in a superficial sense, but also to offer increased affordances for autonomous learning. Opportunities for interaction, situated learning, and support for learning outside formal contexts, have greatly improved because of technology. These affordances are not yet always capitalized on. However, and importantly in the context of this special issue, they offer the opportunity to *support the learning process*. At a superficial level, computers are good at monitoring students’ engagement and progress, and programs exist that use this information to guide learners and encourage them to make decisions about their own learning (Reinders, 2007).

More recently, and perhaps more liberatingly, mobile technologies allow learners to have access to resources in out-of-school contexts (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005), potentially linking affordances in the environment with immediate support. As a result, there is now a much richer appreciation of the role of learning outside the classroom (Benson & Reinders, 2011), not only in terms of the time learners spend learning, practicing and of course using the language in non-formal learning environments, but also in the ways in which educators can prepare learners for, as well as guide them in such learning. A

reconceptualization of language education as the provision of a collection of affordances that start from the learners as individuals, and include classrooms, materials, native speakers, teachers, assessment, other learners, the workplace, and so on, has been made more practically feasible, and methodologically easier to investigate, through the pervasive use of technology. We therefore gradually see a shift in our understanding of autonomy as a rather vague set of skills or attitudes, to more specific abilities to navigate different (learning) environments, with technology playing an important facilitative role.

In addition, technology has revealed the extent and importance of the social networks learners engage in, and their effect on what and how people learn. This has helped researchers and practitioners to learn more about what it means to be an autonomous learner in practice. For example, it is now better understood that autonomy is very much about *interdependence*, not merely about *independence*. Such understanding opens opportunities for more meaningful instructional intervention, or support.

But technology also places constraints on the development of autonomy. As mentioned above, access to, for example, authentic materials or native speakers can be detrimental if learners are not prepared or supported for this. Reliance on technology can, for example, discourage learners from memorizing new vocabulary when they have direct access to an online dictionary. Technology can also give students a false sense of development; online games, for example, have a great deal of potential for language practice (Gee, 2003), but can be limited in terms of genre and domains and may not push learners to engage in other types of communication that are also important, such as extensive reading, or writing a longer text.

This tension between affordance and constraint is a recurring theme in the investigation of the relationship between technology and autonomy, and is one that is also apparent in the contributions to this special issue. The authors each take a different perspective on the intimate relationships between autonomy and technology outlined above.

[Collentine](#) takes the bold move of investigating the relationship between two aspects of autonomy, independent action and decision-making, with subsequent input, and ultimately with linguistic complexity and accuracy. To do this, she created a 3D environment in which 58 learners of Spanish were given a series of tasks to complete. On completion of the tasks, participants were assigned to dyads and asked to discuss their findings and come to a consensus using synchronous chat. By using the tracking data available from the game and combining this with the chat logs, Collentine was able to link students' actions in the game with their subsequent language production. She finds a relationship between learners' actions in the game, the input they receive as a result, and the accuracy and complexity of their language production during chat. However, the relationship is not always straightforward and Collentine makes the important observation that making choices in itself does not lead to more accuracy or complexity; the implication is that the quality of the input matters. This study is particularly interesting as it shows how learners' choices, the language input they receive and their own output, are related. In this way, Collentine's study links autonomy and language acquisition, and provides a strong rationale for a move away from a perception of 'access to resources' as linked directly to the development of autonomy.

Another important factor in developing learner autonomy is the guidance students receive while learning. [Hafner and Miller](#) report on a course developed in Hong Kong that used technology to bridge the structured environment of the course with the unstructured out-of-class learning environment of the students. By analyzing students' blog contributions, through focus groups, and questionnaire responses, they identified a number of elements as particularly important in encouraging learners to take more responsibility for their learning. These included the use of authentic and motivational materials and modes of communication, the opportunity to work independently and to manage the learning process, both individually and in teams, to reflect on the learning and to learn with and from others. Hafner and Miller show that careful syllabus design can incorporate these elements and lead to greater student autonomy.

A similar blend of structured support and increased responsibility for the learning process by learners themselves is evident in Lee's article. She investigated the use of blogs and face-to-face interviews by 16 American undergraduate students preparing for study abroad, on their development of intercultural competence. She found that the blogs gave students the opportunity to work independently but that critical reflection was dependent to some extent on the teacher's guidance and feedback, again highlighting the fact that autonomy is natural to human learning but does not come naturally.

The role of materials for self-study is investigated by Nielson. She studied two of the most popular self-study CD-ROM packages with 326, generally highly motivated, American adult learners. One of the main findings was a very high rate of attrition and among those who did not terminate their self-study, a limited engagement with the packages. She argues that this was due in part to logistical and technical problems, but also in large part due to a lack of support for autonomous learning. Participants indicated wanting more guidance and more content relevant to their work, among others. Nielson concludes by questioning the usefulness of packages such as these.

What these contributions show then, is the diversity in autonomy research. Its relationship with language acquisition, its role in course design, support for the learning process, and materials are only some of the elements in autonomy research and practice. This is both a strength and a weakness. We need more studies such as those above to conduct more detailed and more situated research. At the same time, this also means that autonomy is an important part of many teachers' and researchers' work, and deserves further recognition. The papers in this special issue also show the importance of the teacher or course designer; autonomy is ultimately about learners' ability to take control over their own learning, but the quality of the input, the quality of the syllabus, the quality of the support and the materials provided by the teacher are crucial in its development. We hope this special issue makes a valuable contribution to this ongoing quest.

## REFERENCES

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