

# Fostering Autonomy in Language Learning

Edited by  
David Gardner

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David Gardner**

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**Origin of the papers**

The papers in this book started life as presentations at the international conference entitled: *If We Had to Do It Over Again: Implementing Learner Autonomy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* held at Zirve University, Turkey 1<sup>st</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2010. The papers have since undergone a process of change based on: peer-feedback at the conference, peer-review and editing.

**Content of the papers**

The authors maintain sole responsibility for the content of their papers. The editor and conference host institution do not necessarily share or endorse the ideas expressed nor take responsibility for the use of data or sources in the papers.

**Location of this book**



This book is hosted by the Faculty of Education at Zirve University, Gaziantep, Turkey. It can be accessed electronically at: <http://ilac2010.zirve.edu.tr>

**Citing papers in this book**

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David Gardner  
March 2011, Hong Kong

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# Introduction

## David Gardner

The papers in this book originated at a conference held in June 2010 at Zirve University, in Gaziantep, Turkey. The title of the conference, *If We Had to Do It Over Again: Implementing Learner Autonomy in the 21st Century*, was remarkably insightful as it hints at a “passing of the torch” moment in the field of autonomy in language learning. The combined age of the plenary speakers would be too frightening to calculate but it is probably safe to say that the majority of us have more years of working with learner autonomy behind us than ahead of us. This is a good thing because it represents a maturity in the field which is witnessed by the quality of the academic and professional work being undertaken and by the increasing literature. The conference served its purpose beautifully by juxtapositioning young and old, old and new, looking back and looking forward. This allowed the lessons of the past to be reviewed for the benefit of those who are relatively new to the field and the exciting new prospects of the future to be reviewed for those who may not yet have seen them coming. This book captures the diversity of the conference with papers ranging from those based on a career of experience to others reporting relatively modest experiments with learner autonomy and everything in-between.

Tempting as it might be for readers to see which of the authors in this book are “passing the torch” and which are receiving it, I have not arranged the papers in that way for three good reasons. Firstly, I fear authors might be offended by being assigned either of those labels and may never speak to me again (and I would have to agree with them). Secondly, and more importantly, such grouping might suggest a priority of importance in the papers which would be inaccurate. All the papers selected for this book have their own importance whether written by veterans in the field or anybody else. Thirdly, I have grouped the papers in what I hope is a more significant way.

The theme of this book is fostering autonomy in language learning. The papers have been grouped into six parts each representing a different aspect of researchers’ and practitioners’ attempts to understand, explain, support and develop learner autonomy in language learning both within the taught curriculum and outside it. Part 1, *Observing Learner Autonomy*, contains papers describing situations in which evidence of learner autonomy can be seen in authentic contexts. These are important papers not only because they detail so carefully evidence of developing autonomy in individuals or groups but because they offer us, as readers, the opportunity to reflect on different facets of learner autonomy and, thus, think about ways in which it can be fostered. The papers in Part 2, *Promoting Learner Autonomy*, deal with approaches to developing learner autonomy in various contexts. There is considerable diversity in this section which is not surprising given the wide range of contexts in which the authors work and, indeed, this is representative of the widely ranging situations in which learner



autonomy is promoted throughout the world. This is also the largest section in the book and this is, perhaps, not surprising given the ongoing preoccupation throughout our profession with how to promote learner autonomy. Part 3 of the book, *Perceptions of Learner Autonomy*, contains papers which look at aspects of learner autonomy from the viewpoint of learners. These papers look at what students say about autonomy, whether their behaviour shows signs of learner autonomy and how ready they are for autonomy. These papers allow us to see learner autonomy through learners' eyes and also provide insights into the effectiveness of some attempts to promote learner autonomy. In Part 4, *Teacher Education for Learner Autonomy*, the authors deal with teachers' or teacher trainees' beliefs about and attitudes to autonomy, their level of preparedness for promoting it and whether they receive adequate training for that role. These papers are important for the ongoing fostering of learner autonomy if we accept that classroom teachers are the main promoters of it. Part 5, *Self-Access Centres for Learner Autonomy*, looks at how self-access centres contribute to promoting and supporting learner autonomy in various settings, the management of self-access learning and effective ways of coping with the difficult task of evaluating the learning in self-access centres. These are important issues given the considerable resources poured into establishing and maintaining self-access centres around the world. The better our understanding of the relationship between self-access learning and developing learner autonomy, and in particular the role of a self-access centre, the better we are able to foster autonomy. The final part of the book, *Technology for Learner Autonomy*, covers the use of technology for promoting learner autonomy in four very different contexts each of which has a story to tell about the power, and sometimes the pitfalls, of technology. Technology has been closely connected in many parts of the world with providing opportunities for independent learning and for accessing authentic language materials and thus has had an important role in language learning for many years but it needs to be understood to be used effectively.

Given the theme of this book, it will not be a surprise to readers to learn that more than half the papers in it refer to Henri Holec's *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* (1981) which was the product of a study commissioned by the Council of Europe (published in 1979) with the aim of providing a "theoretical and practical description of the application of the concept of autonomy in the matter of language learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 2). Holec's book is often seen as a starting point for the definition of autonomy in language learning. Holec's definition, in its short form, is "*the ability to take charge of one's own learning*" but in its expanded form runs beyond 200 words. It will also probably be of no surprise to readers to learn that more than half the papers in the current volume also refer to the work of David Little who has researched, presented and published prodigiously in the field of autonomy in language learning. Amongst other things, Little has worked to refine the definition of autonomy in language learning. In his oft quoted book *Learner Autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems* (1991) Little lists what he believes autonomy is not and then attempts to define it but also cautions that "the concept of learner autonomy... cannot be satisfactorily defined in a few paragraphs" (p. 2). He picks up on and expands the notion of autonomy as a *capacity* of the learner but introduces a discussion of the importance of interdependence and its paradoxically close relationship with independence. True to his own statement of the importance of constant reflection and clarification through definition and redefinition of terms (Little, 1991, p. 1), Little has continued to refine his definition and has more recently made a distinction between learner autonomy and language learner autonomy (Little, 2007).

The extent to which both Henri Holec and David Little are referenced in the papers in this book and, indeed, throughout the literature in the field illustrates their importance. Perhaps it also relates to my suggestion of the arrival of a “passing of the torch” moment in the field. The field of autonomy in language learning clearly has, its own “sages”, a history, a literature, widely accepted and quoted definitions, a body of relevant research and, as evidence by the conference from which the papers in this book originated and the many other conferences in the field, an ever increasing community of practitioners determined to foster autonomy in language learning across the world.

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## **Part 1**

# **Observing Learner Autonomy**

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## Metacognition and Imagination in Self-Access Language Learning

**Garold Murray**

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### Abstract

This paper explores the role of metacognition and imagination in language learning. It does this by reporting on a three-year research project which investigated the learning experiences of Japanese first-year university students who were working to improve their English language proficiency in a self-directed learning course. The course was based on a pedagogical model which blended self-access language learning with classroom-based instruction. The inquiry employed a mixed methods approach and gathered a variety of data, including learners' language learning histories, a language beliefs questionnaire, a course evaluation questionnaire, interview transcripts, and learners' portfolios. A preliminary thematic analysis of the qualitative data pointed to several affordances within the learning environment which together served to enhance the learners' metacognitive development. Extending this analysis to include imagination, this paper suggests these affordances also facilitated the role played by imagination in the students' learning, and that the processes of imagination and metacognition were mutually supportive. In order to illustrate these points, the paper takes an in-depth look at the experiences of one participant. Before recounting this learner's story, the paper presents a discussion of the theoretical constructs which guide the analysis, a description of the learning environment and an outline the study.

**Key words:** metacognition, imagination, self-access language learning, self-identity, agency, self-direction, narrative inquiry, Japanese tertiary learners

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### 1. Introduction

While metacognition has been firmly established as an area of inquiry in second language acquisition, researchers are only beginning to consider the role of imagination in language learning. In this paper I explore the joint roles played by metacognition and imagination in the English language learning experiences of Japanese first-year university students who were enrolled in a course which blended self-access language learning with classroom-based instruction. For me, as a teacher and a researcher working in the area of self-access language learning for twenty years, the most significant aspects of the findings of this study have been those which

pertain to the self as a language learner. Working with the students in the course and analysing the data they provided as participants in the research project has changed my entire outlook on self-access language learning.

For many years I thought the key to self-access language learning was *access*, i.e., learners having direct *access* to the materials. In other words, I believed that the hallmark of self-access language learning was individuals learning through direct access to the language materials without the mediation of a teacher. I still believe this to be a defining characteristic; however, my focus has shifted. I now believe that the key word in self-access language learning is *self*. The predominate feature of self-access language learning is that it can enable learners to relate language learning to who they are as people—the self—and provide learning opportunities which support the development of a second language (L2) Self.

A self-access environment can offer affordances (cf. Gibson, 1979) which facilitate the concomitant and mutually supportive roles of metacognition and imagination in the learning process, thereby enabling learners to relate the learning to their sense of self and gradually construct an L2 Self. In this paper I illustrate these points by taking an in-depth look at the learning experiences of one participant in the study who will be called Nobu. Relying on his language learning autobiography, augmented by interview data and evidence from his language learning portfolio, I trace the trajectory of his English language learning from his final months in high school to the end of his second semester as a university student. However, before recounting Nobu's story, I discuss the theoretical constructs which inform my analysis, describe the learning environment and outline the study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Self, agency and identity

In this section of the paper I define the theoretical constructs that inform my interpretation of the data, starting with the notion of self. Van Lier, following the lead of Harter (1999), defines self as “basically anything and everything we call ‘me’ or ‘I’” (van Lier, 2010, p. x). Because the self is manifested in actions, van Lier maintains that a description of self must be accompanied by an explanation of agency which he says “refers to the ways in which, and the extents to which, the person (self, identities and all) is compelled to, motivated to, allowed to, and coerced to, *act*” (van Lier, 2010, p. x). Noting that it is not a passive phenomenon, he adds that “agency refers equally to the person deciding to, wanting to, insisting to, agreeing to, and negotiating to, *act*” (p. x). The self exercising agency is not passive, and neither is it static. According to Bruner (2002), the self is a work in progress, something we construct and reconstruct in order to meet the needs of the situation we find ourselves in.

When I refer to self or learners' sense of self, I am referring to their understanding of who they are as a person which draws on their agency, their perceptions and memories of their life experiences and social interactions, as well as their hopes and dreams of the person they would like to become. As for the relationship between self and identity, I concur with van Lier (2007, p. 58) when he writes that “identities are ways of relating self to world”. This paper focuses on what I see as two aspects or processes of the self: imagination and metacognition.

## 2.2 Metacognition

Metacognition refers to “what one knows about knowing”. The literature makes a distinction between metacognitive knowledge and skills. Flavell (1979) saw metacognitive knowledge as consisting of three components: Person knowledge, what learners know about themselves; task knowledge, what they know about the learning task; and strategic knowledge, knowledge learners have about strategies they can use to carry out the task. Applying Flavell’s framework to language learning, Wenden (1998, p. 519) identified metacognitive skills, “general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, [and] guide their learning, i.e., planning, monitoring, and evaluation”. I use the term metacognition to refer to what a learner knows about how he or she learns a language; and, therefore, view it as a process of relating the language learning to the self.

## 2.3 Imagination

In this paper, I rely on Wenger’s (1998, p. 176) definition which states that imagination is “a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves”. Lave and Wenger (1991) have argued that people learn by becoming members of communities of practice. As they participate in the activities of these social groups, they learn from the more experienced, knowledgeable members. Wenger (1998) contends that we can belong to a community through actual engagement in the activities of the community, alignment, or the power of our imagination. In terms of language learning, this means that learners might imagine themselves participating in target language communities.

### **Imagined communities**

Informed by Wenger’s (1998) work, Norton (2001) has applied Anderson’s (1991) construct of imagined communities to language learning. Imagined communities are “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). An example of an imagined community would be the Independent Language Learning Association which originated in New Zealand and had its inaugural conference in Melbourne, Australia, in 2003. However, there is no formal association, no executive committee—nothing to join; in short, the association does not exist. Nonetheless, every two years the Independent Language Learning Association emerges out of the ethers and “the members” gather for a conference. I, for one, see myself as belonging to a community of educators who do research in this area and who meet for these conferences. Norton (2001) has used the notion of imagined community to explore how learners’ sense of belonging to target language communities which are not immediately accessible can have an impact on their identity construction and language learning.

### **The L2 self**

In another line of inquiry, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) has proposed the “L2 Motivational Self System” which is comprised of three components: the ideal self, what we would like to become; the ought-to-self, what we feel we should become; and the L2 learning experience which refers to the context in which the learning takes place. The L2 Motivational Self System is partially based on Markus and Nurius’s (1986) theory of possible selves, our images of what we can or might become. To summarize the implications of Dörnyei’s model, having a vision of our ideal self as a foreign

language speaker can be a powerful force motivating us to learn the language. In this paper, I explore self-access language learning as a means of support for learners as they expand their visions of self and their understanding of self as a language learner, and imagine themselves participating in target language communities they will access in the future.

### 3. The Study

#### 3.1 Aim and participants

The aim of the inquiry was to investigate the learning experiences of the Japanese first-year university students who were taking an English as a foreign language course which blended self-access language learning with classroom-based instruction. The participants were enrolled at a small Japanese university which offered a liberal arts curriculum with English as the medium of instruction. When they entered the university, their TOEFL scores ranged from 380 to 500. As a part of their degree programme, all of the students had to spend a year abroad studying at one of the university's partner institutions. Before they could start taking courses toward their degree, they had to successfully complete an *English for Academic Purposes* programme which included a course called *Self-Directed Learning* (SDL).

#### 3.2 The SDL course

The SDL course had two main objectives:

1. To help students improve their language proficiency
2. To help students develop their metacognitive knowledge and skills

In order to meet these goals, the course was based on a pedagogical model, or learning structure, which incorporated the following features (for a detailed description, see Murray, 2009a, 2009b):

- Students created and carried out their own personal learning plans. In accordance with Holec's (1981) model of learner autonomy, the students determined their goals, chose appropriate materials, decided how they were going to use these materials, monitored their progress, and assessed their learning.
- Students learned through direct access to target language materials.
- There were no teacher-delivered language lessons. However, there was instruction in learning strategies.
- Students managed their learning. They decided what they would do each day and kept records of their learning in the form of *Daily Learning Log* entries.
- Portfolios played a key role in the management and assessment of learning. In their portfolios students collected evidence of learning, including their long term learning plans and learning log entries.
- Grades were determined through a process of collaborative evaluation (cf. Dickinson, 1987).

Following the orientation sessions at the beginning of the semester, a routine was quickly established in the course, whereby the students came to class and got their materials; the instructor delivered a short lesson; and the students then worked using their materials. From time to time, the students met in small groups to discuss aspects of their learning, or they met individually with the instructor to get help or

guidance. At the end of the class, the students completed their learning log entries and returned the materials.

### 3.3 Methodology

In order to document the students' learning experiences, the study employed a mixed-methods approach. Much of the data collected was directly related to students' work in the course:

- **Language Beliefs Questionnaire:** The students completed the same questionnaire, consisting of ten Likert scale items, at the beginning and end of the course. As a class activity, they then compared their responses and wrote about their reactions and insights.
- **Course Evaluation Questionnaire:** At the end of the course the students completed a course evaluation made up of 20 Likert scale items and six open-ended questions.
- **Language Learning Histories:** During the first two-weeks of the course, the students wrote a language learning history. At the end of the course, they wrote a reflection on their language learning history in view of their experiences in the course. (For a detailed description of this activity, see Murray, 2009a)
- **Portfolios:** The students compiled evidence of their learning, including their learning plans, learning logs and documents resulting from assessment strategies.
- **Interviews:** The data included the transcripts of 27 interviews.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** After the students entered their degree programme, several participants were invited to reflect on their experiences in the course in focus group discussions which were both video- and audio-recorded and transcribed.

## 4. Findings

In this section of the paper I present the findings of an ongoing thematic analysis of the qualitative data guided by work on possible L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986) and imagination as a mode of belonging to social groups or communities (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001; Wenger, 1998). In order to provide a detailed picture of the roles metacognition and imagination can play in language learning and how the learning opportunities available in a self-access learning environment can support these processes, I focus on the experiences of one learner, whom I will call Nobu. However, before turning to Nobu's story, I summarize the results of an earlier examination of the data which inform the current interpretation.

### 4.1 Results of a preliminary analysis

An analysis of the quantitative data indicated that the course was successful in promoting the students' metacognitive development (Cotterall & Murray, 2009). Furthermore, an initial thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed several affordances within the learning environment which appeared to contribute to the students' metacognitive development. Affordances are defined as what the environment offers, provides or furnishes, as these things are perceived by a person in the environment (Gibson, 1979). In other words, acting on affordances is



dependent upon the self, its perceptions and agency. In the context of the SDL course, affordances were supports and opportunities for learning.

Five affordances were identified and labelled as personalization, engagement, experimentation, reflection, and support (Cotterall & Murray, 2009). *Personalization* refers to elements within the course which enabled the learners to adapt the learning to suit their sense of self. Learners also had opportunities to *engage* in all aspects of their learning, from goal setting to assessment, and to *experiment* at each stage with materials and strategies. *Reflection* was encouraged as a part of the daily routine. Throughout the course, students received *support* from their teacher, other students and the materials which provided scaffolding or suggested strategies. In addition, the students were free to exercise their agency by acting on these affordances as they saw fit. In this sense, autonomy might be viewed as an underlying affordance. These affordances not only contributed to the students' metacognitive development, but I contend that they facilitated the role of imagination.

Wenger (1998, p. 185) says that “imagination needs an opening. It needs the willingness, freedom, energy, and time to expose ourselves to the exotic, move around, try new identities, and explore new relations”. In other words, for imagination to do its work, it needs an environment which provides the participants with personal autonomy. Secondly, there has to be a *willingness* which I interpret as a reference to the learners' agency and perhaps even motivation. Thirdly, learners have to be able to engage and experiment with the new. Wenger's comments indicate a strong parallel between the affordances he feels necessary for imagination to do its work and those available in the learning environment created by the SDL course.

## 4.2 Nobu's story

Nobu situated the beginning of his language learning history several months before he entered university and the SDL course. He wrote:

When I was a high school student, I hated to learn English. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand what my test paper said or what the paper required. So, I couldn't get a good score on all of the tests. However, nowadays, students in Japan do need to understand and use English for entering university.

My school is one of the best high schools so the education is very strict and hard. I was not a bad and stupid student, but also not so good student. One day, before three months until the *Centre Entrance Examination* [a nationwide university entrance examination], I ran away from my classroom. I could not stand hard studying.

However, I met destiny at the quiet room. An exchange student girl who came from Norway changed my attitude toward studying English completely.

For Nobu, a moment of crisis suddenly transformed into a positive life-changing experience. His use of the expression “met destiny” captures the intensity of the emotional impact. A young man in his final months of high school, who hated English, experienced exposure to the “exotic”—the feelings of young and, perhaps, first love. As a result of this encounter, the desire to try on a new identity emerged; Nobu had a vision of his future self as a special friend to this young woman. Coincidentally or tangentially, the vision included an L2 Self. As Nobu said in an

interview several months later, “I wanted to talk to her, so I had to learn English”. This moment in time launched Nobu on his language learning trajectory.

In his language learning history, Nobu outlined the early phase of this trajectory by recounting the three ways he found to improve his English ability:

First of all, the way of improving my English ability is “making lots of conversation as I possibly can”. I believe conversation is one of the most effective ways of improving English ability. If I could say something in the proper grammar and proper condition which I want to tell her, she answered me. On the other hand, if I couldn’t say something successfully, she never understood what I wanted to tell her. The good point in this way, “making conversations”, is that I can realize my English is correct or not. In addition, I can memorize a lot of words or phrases easily because I can connect the word’s memory and conversation memory.

In these comments we can see the processes of metacognition and imagination simultaneously at work. Not only is there evidence that Nobu has been reflecting on his learning, considering what works best for him, but he has been monitoring his language use and assessing his accuracy as he engages in conversation. Furthermore, as one might expect from a young man in love, Nobu hints that he has been replaying these conversations in his head. Making the connection between “the word’s memory” and “the conversation memory”, Nobu gives us some insight into how his imagination helped him internalize English words and phrases. Scholars exploring the relationship between imagination and memory have noted the role vivid images and intense emotions can play in committing information to memory (Egan, 1992).

Nobu continued his story with his second strategy for learning English:

Secondly, I watched a lot of DVDs as I could as possible. Honestly, this way was taught to me by her. She is Norwegian, in other words, she is second language learner in English. I have heard that she did the same way to learn English when she was a young child. First time you watch DVD, you must watch it in your mother tongue...and use the English subtitle. The purpose in the first time is having a good time and understanding the story. Second time, you watch the same DVD again, in English with English subtitle. You can understand what the actors or actresses said about 60 percent. In addition, on this time you should find the words or phrases what you cannot understand and look these up in your dictionary. Finally, third time you have to watch it in English sound only. This time you should not use the English subtitle like a native. In this way, you can learn English happily and effectively. Also, through these processes, you can get new vocabulary, phrases, and the gesture which native English speakers do.

The running commentary that Nobu weaves into the description of his well elaborated strategies for using DVDs provides evidence of remarkable metacognitive development in a short space of time. In addition to this, there is the suggestion that watching DVDs has fuelled his imagination and enabled him to have a more detailed vision of an L2 Self. His realization of the importance of understanding and acquiring the gestures that English-speakers use indicate that his vision now includes a different way of being inside his own body, an L2 Self expressed outwardly through a new body language. Later in his reflection on his language learning history, Nobu

noted that understanding English-speakers' gestures could enhance comprehension and that employing body language was an aspect of being able "to make good daily conversation".

However, being able to make good daily conversation was not enough for Nobu. If he were to realize his vision of being a boyfriend, he had to express his feelings and this required language beyond the scope of basic conversations. Not unlike the smitten Count Orsino in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Nobu recognized the potential of music to feed love. He continued his language learning history by writing:

The last way I did to improve my English ability is learning music. English has a lot of beautiful expressions. For example, if I want to say "something lost", now thanks to the beautiful English music, I can say "vanish in the haze". Through listening to English music, I can express what I want to say or what I felt more effectively and in detail.

Again we can see imagination at work in Nobu's language learning and use. The understanding and use of metaphor and poetic language in general involves an act of the imagination (Egan, 1992). Through the poetry of popular music, Nobu acquired the figurative language he needed to express the emotions of his ideal self. In the few short months before he entered university, Nobu had been transformed from a school boy who hated English into a metacognitively astute young man with a palpable vision of an L2 Self.

Upon entering university, Nobu acquired another ideal self who was also a fluent speaker of English. When I asked him in an interview how he saw himself using English in the future, he said, "I want to participate in the Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers....To get this job I need speaking ability". Through a club activity at the university, he had begun to take part in a Japan International Cooperation Agency programme which sends young Japanese overseas to work on projects in developing countries. Nobu now had a vision of an ideal self contributing to make the world a better place through participation in this community of volunteers.

In the SDL course Nobu was able to take steps to make this additional English-speaking ideal self a reality. However, in Nobu's case, when he began the course, he was already engaged in his English language learning and had a clearly laid out language learning plan. Initially, what the SDL course did for Nobu was enable him to pursue his personal learning plan and continue his direct engagement with the learning process. However, the course offered other affordances, such as the opportunity to experiment and to have support in the form of access to a wide range of materials and strategies, which offered him the possibility to refine his language learning plan and build on his metacognitive awareness.

In the interview at the end of the first semester, he said:

The people who live in Japan tend to think when they do English study, they should just read, but I've learned in this semester the best way to learn English is first make the goal, and in my case to get the way of speaking, daily conversation. So I have learned first by watching DVD with a subtitle.... Then after that I changed my strategy. To continue my speaking, I did 'shadowing'.

And ‘shadowing’ is very good for me because, thanks to that, I can continue to speak.

There are several things to note in these comments. First of all, while Nobu says his goal was “to get the way of speaking, daily conversation”, other data he provided indicate that he had, in fact, broken it down into sub-goals: improving listening ability, acquiring body language, and increasing vocabulary. In an interview at the end of the first semester, Nobu offers some insight into his understanding of the importance of having a series of small goals which outline a language learning trajectory. He says:

Because studying English doesn’t help in the end, we have to take the small steps. If we don’t have the small goal, if we just have the long away goal, it’s not a good way to study because sometimes we lose our positive thinking to learn English.

Nobu recognizes that to realize his ideal self, passive study is not sufficient. He has to actively pursue a plan consisting of a series of attainable goals, i.e., a trajectory. To meet these goals, he began the semester working with DVDs. However, as he wrote in his reflection on his language learning history, halfway through the semester he realized that he needed to be able to “continue to speak for a series of sentences”. Looking for a means to meet his new goal of being able to sustain conversation, he discovered the technique of “shadowing”. Unfortunately, he found this strategy did not work well with DVDs because the conversations were often too difficult to understand. Through experimentation with other materials, he discovered a news magazine called *CNN English Express*, which provided short articles better suited to the strategy he was using. The learning log entries in Nobu’s portfolio indicate that he continued to shadow for the rest of the course and, as his English improved, experimented with another magazine accompanied by audio CD which featured longer articles on a wide range of popular topics.

In addition to providing opportunities to experiment, the SDL course encouraged students to reflect on their learning and to assess their progress. Speaking about assessing his learning, Nobu said, “It was very useful for me because I got a chance to think more deeply, what is my goal of this semester.” In an interview at the end of the first semester, Nobu gave an example of how reflection on progress provided him with insights into his goal and strategies for attaining it:

At first I had never thought about evaluation in this course because just what I want to do is studying English. And in the middle of this semester I noticed, just studying is not good to improve my English ability because I’d become sort of selfish, *like I am studying English* and I have never tried to become a better English speaker!

As a result of this insight, Nobu looked for ways to improve his speaking which led to the discovery of shadowing. When asked what evidence he had that shadowing was actually helping him improve his speaking ability, he recounted an incident that occurred in his reading course in which the whole class became engaged in a lively discussion on discrimination against females. Being one of only two male students in a class of twenty or so females, he felt he had to defend himself against their accusations. Pleased with his ability to do this, Nobu concluded the anecdote by saying, “Very good evidence for me!”

In his second and final semester in the SDL course, Nobu continued to work on improving his oral proficiency. However, he had modified his goal, suggesting a shift and further development in his L2 Self. In an interview near the end of the second semester, Nobu said, “I would like to learn Queen’s English.” He now had a vision of his ideal self as a speaker of British English. To realize his vision, he spent most of the semester working with DVDs of British movies and television programmes. Later in the interview talking about what he learned about how to learn English over the last two semesters, he offered further evidence of the evolution of his L2 Self:

For Japanese student, we have always received education, especially in English, like just read the textbook, answer the questions, or solve the grammar questions. But in this course I realized, that to improve language skill, to receive the education is not enough. We have to be aggressive....I think the best way to learn English is to choose the way that people want to learn, not only receive the classes, but also get the education. Students should be active! To improve **own** English ability, I think this is the most important and difficult thing.

Nobu made these comments approximately one year after he fled from his English classroom to avoid the hard study and subject he hated. Through his imagination Nobu had a vision of his ideal self as an English-speaker and through his work to make his L2 Self a reality, his metacognition emerged and developed.

## 5. Discussion

Wenger (1998, p. 185) says that imagination helps us in “defining a trajectory that connects what we are doing to an extended identity, seeing ourselves in new ways”. Nobu’s imagination helped him define a trajectory from Nobu, the reluctant schoolboy, to his vision of his extended identity, Nobu, the Norwegian girl’s boyfriend. A few months later as a university student, he acquired another ideal self, that of volunteer with an international development organization. Projecting into the future and seeing himself participating in imagined English language communities provided Nobu with a model of a future English-speaking-self that he could aspire to. In both cases, his imagination helped him envisage the path he had to take in order to make his ideal self a reality. In order to become the person he wanted to be, he had to identify achievable goals, decide how he was going to pursue these goals, and take action. While Nobu’s imagination helped him picture the end result and the path he had to take, his emerging metacognition gave him insights into the steps along the way. Imagination and metacognition, operating jointly, enabled Nobu to plan his learning.

In addition to the planning, two other aspects of Nobu’s learning which illustrate how closely imagination and metacognition work together are that of monitoring and assessment. Wenger writes, “Imagination requires the ability to disengage—to move back and look at our engagement through the eyes of an outsider” (1998, p. 185). When we ask students to reflect on their learning, to monitor or assess their learning, we are asking them to stand back and look at their engagement. However, in order to determine whether or not they are making progress toward their goals, they need criteria upon which they can base a judgement—or, they need a model, actual or imagined, that can provide a basis for comparison. The data collected in this study suggest that the students’ visions of themselves as L2 speakers actively participating in future communities served as a basis for such a comparison (Murray, 2011). In

Nobu's case his vision of an ideal self as a boyfriend and later as a member of a community of volunteers working in developing countries provided such a model. This helped him visualize which skills he would need to possess or improve. In this way, imagination and metacognition play mutually supportive roles in the monitoring and self-assessment of learning.

Given the close connection between metacognition and imagination, educators need to design learning environments which support learners' metacognitive development and encourage them to engage their imaginations. This study has suggested two important points to keep in mind when creating these learning contexts. In the first place, as Wenger (1998) pointed out, learners need freedom. Secondly, as Nobu's story suggests, the affordances that support metacognitive development also facilitate the role of the imagination in language learning. In other words, educators need to create learning environments which offer learners the freedom to be directly engaged in their learning, to experiment, to reflect, and, of course, to personalize the learning. An important aspect of personalizing the learning is the learners' freedom to choose materials they can relate to, but which also feed their imagination by providing models of possible selves and images of future communities they might participate in. For this reason, it is important to promote the use of pop culture-based materials, for example, movies, television programmes, magazines, music and internet sites, which may prompt learners to try on new identities and to expand their visions of self.

## 6. Conclusion

Through reflection on the experiences of individual learners, like Nobu, my perception of self-access language learning has dramatically shifted. I now recognize that the salient feature of self-access learning is the potential it offers learners to relate their learning to their sense of self. For instance, the development of metacognitive knowledge and skills, which I have long believed to be an essential component of self-access learning, I now see as primarily a process of relating the learning to self. Furthermore, the experiences of the learners in this study have convinced me of the potential of self-access learning to support the role of imagination in language learning. One of the ways it can do this is by providing learning opportunities that can help learners make their vision of an L2 Self a reality. This study has demonstrated that these learning opportunities, or affordances, available in a self-access learning environment can also support learners' metacognitive development. However, in order to act on these affordances, learners need to be in an environment which promotes self-direction and, in so doing, supports their exercise of agency. As I said at the beginning, I once saw self-access language learning as being about learners having access to target language learning materials. I now see self-access language learning as being about the self, situated in an environment which offers a number of affordances for language learning.

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## Autonomy and Context: A tale of two learners

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### Abstract

Despite the lack of a single, universal theory of autonomy, there is agreement on the educational importance of developing autonomy and that autonomy can take a variety of forms, depending on learning context and learner characteristics. This paper examines autonomy in distance language learning and how capacity and opportunity for decision-making relates to context, by drawing on a longitudinal study of the experiences of individual language learners at The Open University (UK). It concludes by considering the implications for teachers and course designers.

**Key words:** distance language learning, autonomy, learning context, learner experience, tertiary students

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## 1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

There has been no shortage of definitions of learner autonomy since the work by Holec (1981) and others in the 1980s. Many emphasise the control of learning through critical reflection and decision-making. Despite the lack of a single, universal theory of autonomy, Hurd (2005) notes agreement on the educational importance of developing autonomy and that autonomy can take a variety of forms, depending on learning context and learner characteristics. The relationship between learning context and autonomy is the focus of this paper. The wider learning context in this case is distance language learning.

Although distance learning may be viewed by some as a minority, specialised area, its relevance, and the insights it may offer, are enhanced by the increasing use of distance learning alongside classroom-based language learning in so-called blended learning, together with growing opportunities for online language learning. Developments in new technologies and demand for flexible learning opportunities to suit changing social and economic circumstances have driven this shift in provision (White, 2007). As a result, divisions between distance learning and more traditional classroom based programmes are disappearing, but this change also brings with it the potential need for adjustments on the part of the learner in the process of developing what White (1999, 2003, 2005) describes as the “learner-context interface”. In learning environments not directly mediated by a teacher, learners are involved in what she sees as learners:



constructing and assuming control of a personally meaningful and effective interface between themselves, their attributes and needs and the features of the learning context. (White 2008, p. 7)

She suggests that this requires learners to be:

active agents who evaluate the potential affordances within their environments, and then create, select and make use of tasks, experiences and interlocutors in keeping with their needs, preferences and goals as learners. (White, 2008, p. 7)

In other words, these environments of necessity require learners to make choices and decisions, exercising their capacity for autonomy.

Of course, distance learning has not always been seen as autonomous learning. Benson (online) has pointed out that, more often than not, in the past it was considered as “learning by yourself”, following a programme determined by course writers, rather than exercising control over learning. However, technological developments have enabled a greater focus on, and increased opportunities for, communication between learners as well as with the teacher, greatly enhancing opportunities for learning through interaction. Researchers such as Ushioda (2007) have emphasised the importance of interaction in a Vygotskian view of learning as a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1986). But whether increased opportunity for interaction actually leads to more, or more effective, language learning depends also on the context for that interaction, what participants bring to the interaction and how interplay between them influences participation.

Breen (2001) identifies a range of what he terms learner contributions to language learning which he defines as the attributes of the individual learner and the conceptualisations and beliefs they bring to the language learning experience. This in turn means that learners need self-awareness and knowledge about their own perceptions, attitudes and abilities (Hurd, Beaven, & Ortega, 2001) if they are to become effective learners in an environment where they have greater responsibility for managing their learning. White (2003) defines the distance learning context as comprising all aspects of the distance learning course, target language learning sources and the environments in which the learning takes place. She notes that distance learners have a major role in selecting and structuring elements within the context to create an optimal learning environment for themselves. Once again this points to a need for self-awareness and knowledge of available options.

The decisions and choices open to distance language learners and the extent of the adjustment which they have to make to their previous approach to study stem in part from the following specific features of distance learning:

- physical separation of learner and teacher, of learners from each other, and of teachers and learners from the institution (perhaps leading to delayed responses; lack of non-verbal cues; a sense of isolation; difficulties in gauging personal progress);
- learner responsibility for scheduling their study time in keeping with a study plan for the programme determined by the institution rather than having to attend at set times (allowing more flexibility, but with greater onus on learners to manage their learning);

- provision of teaching through structured study materials in a variety of formats, e.g. print-based, DVD-Rom and/or online activities, which take the place of the teacher in conventional settings (and offer learners potential choices/decisions, e.g. about activity/route through material);
- opportunities for contact with teachers and other learners through face-to-face or synchronous online meetings or via asynchronous discussion forums accessed from a course website and email conferencing systems (offering choice of medium, potential for increased contact, but also raising time management issues).

Where the specific features of distance learning (i.e. separation; flexibility; choice of materials and study route; expectations of control and self-management) intersect with aspects of identity, personal and social contexts, this can foster or inhibit learning as learners come to terms with the demands of a learning context that may require a change in their role, but which also offers the opportunity for metacognitive growth (White, 1999). In other words, the efforts which learners make to accommodate and adapt to the demands of this new learning environment can lead to enhanced learning capacity and successful learning. Thus, the context or setting, as well as the learner contributions, influences learning.

Palfreyman (2006, p. 352) notes a tendency in earlier research to “treat learners in relative isolation from their social context”. In a study of student use of material and social resources in a specific (Middle Eastern) social context, he noted the importance of learner identity, and social and gender roles. More recently, Ushioda (2009) has emphasised the need to focus on people rather than on learners and to remember that *language learner* is just one aspect of a person’s identity. Different facets of learners’ identity will come into play in the decisions and choices they make and so shape their personal ‘learner-context interface’.

This paper explores the experiences of two life-long language learners studying with The Open University (UK). Their experiences illustrate the interplay between autonomy and the learning context and highlight some issues for teachers and course designers to consider.

## 2. The Research Context

### 2.1 The experience of distance language learning

The learner experiences described in this paper stem from an investigation into the ways in which adult beginner distance learners of French, German and Spanish at The Open University in the UK (UKOU) overcame difficulties and kept up their motivation during a year-long part-time course. Volunteers were asked to complete and return a guided learning experience log month-by-month in which they noted the highs and lows of study each month, how they overcame difficulties, what kept them going and the support they received from other people. The initial aim of the research was to identify the social, affective and motivational strategies deployed by learners (Murphy, forthcoming). However, the logs also provided insight into the choices and decisions learners were making, and how the process of creating an effective learner-context interface was working (or not), through their references to different elements of the learning context as defined by White (2003) (i.e. course components, target language sources and the environment in which they were studying). The logs were therefore re-examined to explore the relationship between

the learning context and autonomy, in the form of the choices and decisions made by learners. The aim in this opportunistic study was to understand the extent to which individuals reflected White's view of learners as "active agents" (2008). What evidence was there that learners evaluated the potential affordances of the course components, target language sources and other aspects of the study environment? To what extent did they then create, select and make use of tasks, experiences and other language speakers in keeping with their needs, preferences and goals as learners? Or was their learning determined by circumstances in their learning context which they did not or could not control? After providing some further background to the investigation and how it was carried out, these questions are explored through the examination of the experience of two learners.

## 2.2 The distance language course components

The UKOU has been offering distance language learning programmes to part-time adult students in the UK and Europe since 1994. Currently, courses are offered from beginner to advanced levels. Course materials comprise a combination of course books plus CDs, DVDS or DVD-ROMs providing audio and video material, interactive activities and transcripts. The focus of each course is the course website where a study planner indicates which material should be studied when and provides links to associated online activities, assessment materials and tasks, student forums and online synchronous tutorial spaces (both available to students to use at any time to communicate with each other) as well as links to other useful resources such as study skills sites, language specific library resources such as online dictionaries and newsfeeds, depending on the level of the course. Students are allocated to a tutor group. Tutors conduct optional group tutorials and provide detailed feedback and grading for assignments which are compulsory. Assignments assess both written and oral skills as do the end-of-course assessments or exams. Tutors provide on-going academic support to all the students in their tutorial group. There is also a network of regional centres with trained teams of learning advisers who can provide support for students who run into difficulties due to personal or work problems or who need further support with study skills for distance learning. At the time when the research was carried out, students were able to opt for a version of their course either with face-to-face group tuition at a local study centre, or online synchronous group tuition via an audio-conferencing system.

## 2.3 The learners

UKOU language courses are studied part-time by people of any age from 18 upwards. There are no formal entry requirements, although detailed advice is given about the previous language learning experience needed to succeed in courses above beginner level. At beginner level, as is often the case, many students sign up for courses in languages which they have previously studied at school or elsewhere. However, many are new to distance learning or distance language learning, new to language learning or to a particular target language. For example, in Coleman and Furnborough's (2010) study of the first UKOU cohort for Beginners' Spanish, among the respondents completing a pre-course questionnaire (n= 1345), ages ranged from 18-82, with 48% in the 45-64 age range, one in three said they had no previous knowledge of Spanish, 20% spoke no other languages and around 60% had no previous experience of independent or distance language learning. The potential range and combination of learner contributions and individual learning environments is enormous. The combination of being new to distance learning and language learning can be particularly challenging but learning an additional language at a

distance for the first time may also require substantial adjustment in terms of beliefs, attitudes and approach, compared with previous language learning experience.

The research which the following examples are drawn from was carried out with volunteers who had responded to an initial survey of expectations at the start of their French, German and Spanish beginner level courses. 101 students agreed to take part and to keep a log of their experiences over the period from February to September. They included male and female students aged between 22 and 75. Many had previous experience of learning the language, sometimes at school, or perhaps through living abroad or family connections. As might be anticipated where voluntary participation is invited over a long period of time, the number who kept the log regularly through to the end of the course dwindled from 101 to 32. The cases presented here are drawn from among the regular participants in this study. Although not carried out as detailed case studies, in keeping with Gomm *et al.*'s (2000) view of case study research, they allow the exploration of real-life context and attempt to understand the learners' perspective (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). They are illustrative of the ways in which individuals react to the challenge of accommodating their own unique combination of motivation, language and distance learning experience, attitudes and beliefs, learning styles and personal circumstances to the features of distance language learning and a specific language programme. The intention is not to make generalisations or draw specific conclusions, but through this exploration of individual experiences, to understand issues that may be important for teachers or course designers and areas where further research may be needed.

### 3. The Cases: Two beginners

The students whose experiences are examined here were both studying French (the language which consistently attracts the highest number of UKOU beginner students). They are referred to by pseudonyms. Both completed and returned logs for each month from February to September. They were selected as learners taking the same course, though with different tuition modes, one female, one male, who had kept a learning experience log each month from February to September. The logs comprised a set of questions with a mix of tick boxes and space for more extensive, but optional comments. This design was adopted both to secure similar types of data from individuals and to make the task as easy as possible for them in view of the many demands on part-time learners' time. The two students selected for further examination here regularly provided written comments in addition to ticking the boxes.

A picture of their experience derived from these log entries is presented for each student and discussed in relation to the following questions prompted by White's view of the process involved in constructing a meaningful learner-context interface:

- What evidence was there that learners evaluated the potential affordances of the course components, target language sources and other aspects of the study environment?
- To what extent did they then create, select and make use of tasks, experiences and other language speakers in keeping with their needs, preferences and goals as learners?

### 3.1 Dawn

Dawn was a 55 year old student taking the version of the course with online tutorials. Her logs showed the importance she attached to contact with her tutor and with other students. She made a point of attending all the online synchronous tutorial sessions offered, as she appreciated the chance to get some instant answers to queries, clarification of language points and correction of her pronunciation as well as the opportunity to interact with others. She contacted her tutor at other times to clarify assignment corrections and feedback, for example: “I wanted to know why something [in my assignment] had been marked as incorrect when I had found it in the dictionary.” She also sought reassurance from her tutor because although she gained a lot from participating in the tutorials, in February she wrote: “most of the class are faster learners than me and it daunts me. I feel as if I am miles behind. What can I do?” The solution that she came up with, apart from talking to her tutor, was to buy some “simple reading books and a French crossword book. They inspire me because I can understand them.”

As well as attending the tutorials, Dawn found the asynchronous conferencing and the telephone were useful ways to keep in touch with other learners and, despite her concerns about her ability to keep up with other students, she was part of a small self-help group which met between tutorials (UKOU students are actively encouraged to form such groups). She appeared to use this group as a source of help and advice on grammar points in preference to asking her tutor. For example, she reported that she had been in touch with others to discuss verb usage and resolve language queries, but also that the group provided the opportunity to take part in discussions in French. She appreciated the “reassurance that others have difficulties too”, as well as “talking through problems – sharing ideas”. It seems that the informal self-help group was more conducive to this kind of exchange than the tutorials, perhaps because online tutorials tend to be more intensely language-focused and lack the breaks and other opportunities for casual contact and discussion between learners that may be available in a face-to-face tutorial. Dawn decided to make maximum use of the course components that involved contact with others for all the reasons mentioned above, yet still she mentioned in June that lack of contact with other students was making it harder for her to keep going. Dawn was clearly finding it difficult to come to terms with the ‘separation’ aspect of distance learning.

When it came to the course materials, there was no evidence that she evaluated or selected according to her particular needs or goals, or that she created or adapted tasks or experiences. In fact, she appeared to work through all the materials exactly as they were presented. As a result, study conflicted with her work and family commitments and she felt unable to keep up. Dawn’s logs indicate that she felt coursework took a lot more time than she had expected or budgeted for. In February she wrote: “I understood that 8 hours a week would be enough but it’s nowhere near that. I need twice that and can’t really spare the time. I am studying at 11 o’clock at night and am shattered at work most of the time”. Every month for the rest of the course she noted that she had difficulties finding time to study. In May she “stayed up until 2 am”. In June, in response to the log question asking what action she took to get over this difficulty, her response was: “nothing that I can do. If I could study all day and every day, then I might be able to keep up!” In August she wrote: “took my assignment on holiday with me”, and she noted that although she should have been studying Book 6 of the course, she was still only half way through Book 5.

Dawn makes no reference in her logs to any contact with other speakers of French or use of target language sources apart from a comment about purchase of some reading books in February and again in May when she wrote that she: “was surprised at how much I understood”. However, in March, she noted that she was inspired by “the fact that I seem to be getting better”, although she did not indicate the source of evidence for this self-evaluation. Towards the end of the course, she described her desire to learn the language so that she could talk to people when she went to France at some point in the future, but there were no references to any previous visits or contacts.

There is some evidence that Dawn evaluated the potential affordances of the course components in relation to her own attributes and needs in the value she placed on the tutorials and her decision to join the self help group, although she did not feel she had enough contact even so. Her comments indicate her view of language learning as a social process. She did not take a selective or creative approach to the course materials and felt constantly under time pressure trying to balance the course with her work and other commitments. She made little use of target language sources other than the course materials, although she appeared to have a strong desire to learn the language and saw herself using the language in France in the future. She was able to positively evaluate her own progress once she got over her concerns about being behind everyone else. These concerns were most likely dispelled through interaction in the self help group. In April she recorded that this group inspired her to keep going. Overall, the impression she gives is of a learner struggling to come to terms with distance learning, trying to find ways to accommodate to what it offered and to find ways around the challenges it presented, but often at a loss as to what to do and therefore not taking control to the extent that she might have. It was something of a surprise, therefore, to read the final entry in the September log: “I enjoyed the course and have booked the next one”. By then it seems she had arrived at a learner-context interface that allowed her to continue.

### 3.2 Bill

Bill was a 59 year old student taking the version of the course with face-to-face tutorials. From the outset, his log entries included an evaluation of his learning environment. It was not promising... In his first log, he noted that work would make it difficult for him to get to any group tutorials, thus restricting the course components available to him, and that as he would be travelling a lot for work, he would have to make the best of any time available. He commented that he had trouble fitting study into his schedule but that this was “nothing that 36 hours/day wouldn’t solve!” There were further comments on this theme throughout the course. In June for example: “Work demands still interfering with study!...Can’t do much about work demands, so the only option is to fit in study whenever possible!” Although distance study allowed him the flexibility to work in this way, at the same time, he realised that not having a regular study pattern can bring other problems. As he wrote in March: “Motivation is not a problem, just lack of time that results in fragmented study. The lack of continuous input can be difficult requiring time to review last work before progressing”. As well as being aware of the problem, he had worked out a way to handle it.

His logs indicated an evaluation of target language sources available to him and he created opportunities to practise and acknowledged their value for his learning. He was a member of a local twinning association and although in February he lacked

confidence to take part in their '*Cercle français*' conversation sessions, he kept in regular email contact with people in France. Despite his work schedule, this contact was noted throughout his logs and he found it a tremendous source of support for his learning as it gave him an opportunity to revise and use the structures and vocabulary he had learnt, provided reading and writing practice and the opportunity for some useful correction from his correspondents. In May he spent 5 days in France on a twinning trip. He wrote in his log "On Thursday, prior to going to France was concerned about lack of new language skills but after arriving began to realise just how much I have benefited from this course." Although he had no contact with other students in his tutorial group, his wife was also taking the course and they often studied together. Apart from the opportunity for clarification and possible practice, understanding and support from a partner or significant others have been found to be crucial for persisting with distance study programmes (Simpson & Asbee, 2006).

In relation to the course components, the inability to attend tutorials and lack of contact with other students, whether at tutorials or through the online forums, has already been noted. Bill initiated a number of individual contacts with his tutor for clarification of grammar points and arrangements for his end of course oral assessment. His other main source of contact with his tutor was the feedback on his assignments which he noted as very helpful. Apart from lack of time to study, another recurrent theme in his logs was the difficulty he had in understanding audio extracts delivered at normal speed. This led him to spend more time on the audio materials, listening repeatedly, and to make regular use of the transcripts provided. He felt that his difficulties were down to the fact that, in his view, his vocabulary was not extensive enough. He began to set himself targets for learning new words and again drew on his French contacts to supplement the course materials, a further example of creating a task and making use of other language speakers to meet his needs. As he noted in May, his response to the problem was: "Don't panic – ask for repetition from my French friends. Try and maintain vocab targets."

The logs showed that Bill evaluated the potential affordances of his learning environment and available target language sources. He made good use of these sources to make up for the way in which the environment reduced his scope for taking advantage of course components such as tutorials, and contact with other learners apart from his wife. Although he could have made use of the OU asynchronous conferencing system to keep in touch with his group while travelling, he opted not to do this, but instead chose to use the time for email contact with French friends and members of the twinning association which he was involved with. This was in keeping with his goal of participating actively in the twinning arrangements and being able to communicate more effectively with more people in France. With respect to the other course components, he contacted his tutor with questions about a few grammar points or administrative matters, but again, his logs indicated that he used his French contacts to try out/practice what he was learning or to clarify things. In June he noted: "constant flow of emails assist with written and reading work". As he experienced difficulties with the audio materials, he made more use of the transcripts than might otherwise be the case and had to re-play extracts frequently. Despite his time pressures, he didn't indicate that he worked selectively through the main course materials, although he began to set himself targets for vocabulary learning. The overall picture in Bill's case is of a student who has taken control of his learning and made decisions about aspects of his learning environment

which have enabled him to develop an effective learner-context interface ready for his next distance French course.

## 4. Discussion: Autonomy and context

To differing extents, both Dawn and Bill demonstrated the capacity to manage their learning, evaluate aspects of their learning environment and make decisions based on their needs, preferences and goals. Both opted to engage with some course components rather than others, created practice opportunities with other language speakers and used them as a source of clarification and explanation although in Dawn's case, they were fellow students, while in Bill's they were contacts in France made via the twinning association. Both made use of target language sources to evaluate their progress and motivate, but more significantly so in Bill's case. For both, a major feature of their learning environment was a chronic shortage of time for study due to competing demands, but neither appeared to explicitly prioritise specific course materials and activities in relation to their own learning needs or goals. Even so, Bill seems to have adjusted quickly to his new learning environment, profiting from the flexibility of distance learning, and unconcerned by any sense of separation as he had created and maintained other contacts instead. For Dawn, the process was less straightforward and apparently less positive at times, a more strategic approach might have improved the experience and reduced some of the stress, but ultimately she also adjusted sufficiently to be able to continue distance language study.

Although this research was not specifically set up to explore the relationship between autonomy and context, it does illustrate some of the ways in which distance learners manage and adjust to a new learning environment and provides practical examples of the challenges involved. It suggests, perhaps, that course designers and teachers should increase efforts to flag up the choices and decisions that can be made by learners. Although progress has been made in this area (Murphy, 2008), it seems there is scope for further awareness-raising, for example about target language sources available and how to use them in self-evaluation and self-assessment as well as for language practice, or about the identification of individual goals and needs and how to select or create relevant activities. Not all students may want, or be able, to attend tutorials, but whether online or face-to-face, learners need opportunities for informal exchange about the experience of learning. All of these things can enhance self-awareness and reflection on the learning process, so that learners can take informed decisions.

## 5. Conclusion

More detailed case studies specifically exploring the distance learner experience are needed in order to better understand the ways in which autonomy may be exercised to create a productive and effective learning environment in keeping with learner needs, preferences and goals. From this study, it appears that course designers and tutors could do more to overtly acknowledge and encourage learners to become aware of the different attributes, experience and features of their own learning environment and to think more explicitly about the choices they can make, so that they actively shape their learning context to ensure a positive learning experience.



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## The Place of Grammar in an Autonomous Classroom: Issues and research results

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### Abstract

The place of grammar has been a controversial topic in the literature for more than a century. However, researchers and practitioners interested in autonomous language learning have by and large avoided joining the discussions. This paper, after outlining some traditional views on the effects of grammar teaching, reports on the results of the LAALE project (*Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment*). Within this project the linguistic, and thus grammatical, development of a class of autonomous learners from a Danish comprehensive school was systematically observed over a period of four years. The learners were not exposed to explicit grammar teaching, but were involved in language-awareness activities instead. Statistical results are compared to learners following a more traditional textbook-based syllabus.

**Key words:** autonomous language learning, grammar, LAALE project, language awareness, EFL, Danish secondary students

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### 1. Introduction

The place of grammar teaching and learning has been controversially discussed since the beginnings of institutionalised foreign language courses. It is considered a highly relevant, even crucial, topic of discussion in most methodological approaches, no matter whether they attribute to grammar teaching an important role or a negligible one. By contrast, the literature on autonomous language learning has so far been remarkably silent on this issue. The question in which way and how successfully autonomous learners achieve the linguistic aims of a language course, and thus by implication grammatical proficiency, has been focused on in some rare cases only (cf. Benson, 2001; Little, 2008).

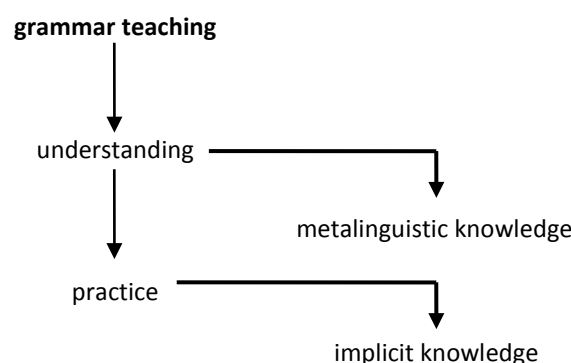
For many teachers embarking on the route towards implementing more learner autonomy the question what to do with grammar seems to be extremely important. They all too often see it as the major obstacle towards passing over responsibility to their learners, because it is here that the former teaching orthodoxy conflicts most obviously with their new agenda. There is more often than not a deep-seated belief that complex grammatical phenomena call for some kind of ‘expert explanation’, since it is widely assumed that young learners cannot work out the rules themselves.

The conventional belief system holds that grammatical explanations provide some kind of ‘shortcut’ towards mastering and internalising the rules, and thus facilitating acquisition processes. On the other hand, the teachers’ experience with recurrent learner errors, which persist despite intensive teaching endeavours, might have raised some suspicion that there are limitations to the effects of grammatical instructions. So there is a basic need to address the issue of the place of grammar in an autonomous classroom, and come up with some convincing arguments that there are viable alternatives to teacher-led grammatical explanations.

This paper, after outlining some general assumptions about the effects of explicit grammar teaching, reports on the linguistic results of a class of mixed ability learners attending an autonomous classroom in which language awareness-raising replaces grammar teaching.

## 2. The Effects of Explicit Grammar Teaching

The traditional arguments concerning the effects of grammar teaching run along the following lines: Grammatical instructions allow learners to understand the linguistic regularities, which means that they lead to metalinguistic knowledge. If they are complemented by intensive code-focused practice, the rules will then be internalised. In other words, grammar instruction in combination with practice results in implicit knowledge, which enables learners to access the rules and apply them in communicative situations (Figure 1).

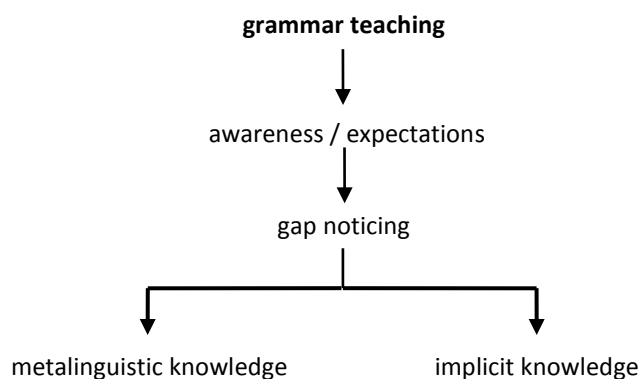


**Figure 1: The Traditional View of Grammar Instruction**

There is a lot of research evidence that this simple model does not represent acquisitional processes adequately. There would have to be an interface between metalinguistic knowledge and implicit knowledge, which would make explicit metalinguistic knowledge accessible and thus ‘usable’ in communicative situations. This claim or theoretical stance is not supported by most empirical studies (cf. research findings *inter alia* by Hecht & Green, 1992; Terrell, 1991).

A slightly more sophisticated theoretical view of the effects of grammar teaching, and one that also plays a prominent role in the focus-on-form discussions going on even today, makes some weaker claims (cf. Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1991). Here grammar teaching mainly has a priming effect which leads to certain expectations on the part of learners when processing language. It might thus facilitate gap noticing,

i.e. gaps between the learner's actual state of knowledge and structures that have not yet been mastered up to that point (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: The Priming Effect Model**

Whether noticing leads to metalinguistic or implicit knowledge is also still an unsolved problem (cf. O'Rourke, 2002). Again convincing research evidence for either claim is missing.

So what kind of research evidence is there when it comes to the effects of grammar instruction? It is here that the experimental findings of Pienemann and his research team might be relevant. The main points of Pienemann's Teachability Hypothesis can be summarized thus (cf. Pienemann, 1989, 1999):

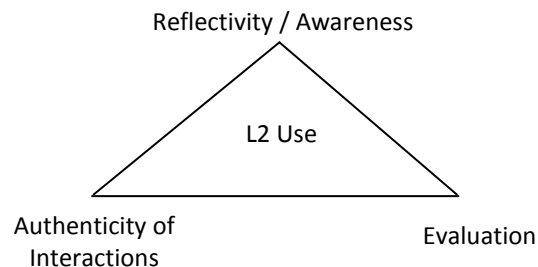
- Pienemann starts out from one of the substantive findings of mother tongue and SLA research, which indicate that many linguistic structures are acquired in a fixed natural order. That is, it is not only in L1 acquisition that many linguistic structures are acquired in a relatively fixed sequence, but also in L2 acquisition when learners are immersed in naturalistic settings.
- These natural orders of acquisition cannot be changed by rule teaching and ensuing practice phases. Neither can teaching have the effect that certain stages in the acquisitional order are skipped altogether.
- Grammar instruction can, however, have a salient effect on one condition: If learners are ready. The rules should belong to the developmental stage which learners would acquire next on the natural route of acquisition.

When it comes to assessing the relevance of these findings for the classroom two problems come to the fore. First, our knowledge of the orders of acquisition in naturalistic environments is still fairly limited. We could not possibly design a syllabus whose linguistic progression could be built on the basis of a natural order of acquisition. Second, in a foreign language classroom there are 20 or more individual learners who in all likelihood are not at identical stages in their linguistic development. They are bound to differ as regards the type of linguistic input they need in order to make significant progress. In other words, any teacher-fronted lockstep approach will have to ignore the acquisitional, and possibly also general motivational, needs of the majority of these learners.

### 3. The Need for Differentiation and Awareness-Raising

So the obvious answer to this state of affairs is differentiation. If there are 20 or so individual learners with diverse individual linguistic needs and also different motivational orientations, then we must set up a learning environment which allows for a differentiated approach. In this environment the learners must be provided the opportunity, and even requested, to identify their individual needs themselves. Since it is the teachers' responsibility to support learners in this process, they can do this by introducing activities which imply reflectivity and awareness-raising (cf. Dam, 2003). These concepts belong to the cornerstones of an autonomous classroom. They are complemented by the notion of authenticity and the use of the target language.

Such a learning environment is likely to ensure that all aspects of the learning undertaking can be constantly reviewed, evaluated and worked upon to promote learning. In a word, it is a type of classroom in which all the processes and procedures are made an explicit topic, or to express it differently: the processes become content. The major principles of an autonomous classroom are summarized in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: The Principles of an Autonomous Classroom**

Since the autonomous approach to classroom learning is sceptical about the transmissibility of knowledge, and subscribes to constructivist theories of learning, the explicit instruction of grammatical rules has no place in the autonomous classroom. Instead, in accordance with the above-mentioned principles, activities have to be introduced which lead to grammatical awareness-raising.

### 4. Grammatical Awareness-Raising: Linguistic Issues as task content

One of the challenges of the autonomous classroom consists of devising activities which have a target language issue as task content. It is essential here that the language focus is geared to and appeals to the learners' interest, and allows them to engage in the task with the attitude of a linguistic researcher. In these activities, the dichotomy between meaning-focused and form-focused tasks, which figure so prominently in the focus-on-form discussion, disappears, since a language phenomenon becomes the research interest and goal of the learners (for illustrative examples cf. Johns, 1986; Legenhausen, 1996).

The following example might serve as an illustration. It is taken from an e-mail project in which two German classes of 18-year-olds and four American and Canadian high school classes participated using English as the language of

communication. At the beginning of the project all learners and native speakers introduced themselves and exchanged welcome messages. Since all these texts belonged to the same text type or register, they invited observations as regards stylistic and grammatical differences between learner and native speaker texts. So the task was to analyse the learner texts against the foil of native speaker texts, i.e. it was an activity focused on learner language itself. These analyses were facilitated by the use of a concordancing program which produced frequency lists and typical collocations. They generated a host of linguistic insights into the characteristics of learner language and provoked learners to gap-noticing. It became very obvious that in the course of the project the learner texts were heavily influenced by their native speaker peers, and improved in quality (cf. Eck, Legenhausen, & Wolff, 1995).

That learners can attain high levels of grammatical proficiency if awareness-raising replaces grammar instruction has been shown by the results of the LAALE project (*Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment*), run by Dam and Legenhausen (Dam & Legenhausen, 1996; Legenhausen, 1999, 2001, 2003).

## 5. Grammatical Proficiency of Autonomous Learners: Results of the LAALE project

Within the LAALE project the linguistic development of a class of mixed ability learners from Denmark, who were taught according to the principles of autonomous language learning, was systematically observed over a period of four years. The learners started in grade 5 as 11-year-olds, and in the first two years they had four 45-minute lessons per week, organized in two double periods. In grades 7 and 8 the number of lessons was reduced to three.

An array of various tests and data elicitation procedures was administered at regular intervals. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results, identical tests were carried out with a class of German grammar-school students (*Gymnasium*). This class followed a textbook-based communicative syllabus in which explicit grammar instruction, followed by practice phases, formed part of the teaching methodology. In this context it should be noted that the German educational system is a highly selective three-tier system in which only about 40 per cent of the students attend a *Gymnasium*. Most of them intend to take up university studies after the school-leaving examination (*Abitur*). So the following statistics compare the results of an autonomous mixed ability class with higher-aptitude students from Germany. The first set of data on grammatical accuracy derives from conversational interactions, i.e. pairs of learners were asked to talk about a topic of their own choice for about four to five minutes.

The questions we were interested in include:

- How do the conversational interactions of 'autonomous' learners compare to the interactions of 'traditional' learners following a well-defined syllabus which includes grammar instruction? What impact do the learning/teaching approaches have on communicative attitudes and the discourse quality of interactions?
- What accuracy levels do the learners under discussion achieve? Are the misgivings of researchers like Peter Skehan justified, who claims that early reliance on meaning-focused activities, and they are a dominant feature of the

autonomous classroom, prevent learners from developing the relevant formal features (Skehan, 1998)? Does the argument hold that learners are so focused on getting their meaning across that they just do not pay attention to, say, inflectional endings, because they are all too often not essential for the message?

The first illustrative example below relates to the acquisition of a grammatical core chapter in the beginning years of English, i.e. the acquisition of *do-support questions*. The mother tongues of both Danish and German learners (referred to respectively in the tables of data as AG for the Autonomous Group and TG for the Traditional Group) form questions by inversion, which implies that the learning difficulty must be regarded as very similar for both groups. The data were elicited after about 18 months of learning English.

Although at first sight overall accuracy figures for questions requiring *do-support* (Table 1) seem to indicate slightly better results for the traditional group (TG: 74 %) than for the autonomous learners (AG: 70 %), the figures misrepresent the degree of creative mastery of this structure. The very fact that almost two out of three questions (38.5%) requiring *do-support* in the TG corpus are constructed with the verbs *like* and *live* (f = 83) points to the formulaic character of these questions. They are practised intensively in the textbook, and learners seem to have automatized them to a large extent. If questions with *like* and *live* are subtracted from the count (Table 2), the accuracy rate drops in both corpora, however, much less so in the AG corpus (TG: 74 % => 46 %; AG: 70 % => 63 %).

**Table 1: Do-support in Questions**

	Frequencies	Well-formed Questions		Ill-formed Questions	
		f	%	f	%
Total					
TG	135	100	74	35	26
AG	142	99	70	43	30

TG: Traditional group

AG: Autonomous group

**Table 2: Do-support Without the Verbs *like* and *live***

	Frequencies	Well-formed Questions		Ill-formed Questions	
		f	%	f	%
Total					
TG	52	24	46	28	54
AG	103	65	63	38	35

The following example can serve to illustrate an implication of Pienemann's Teachability Hypothesis. If structures are taught which do not belong to the immediate next stage of the natural route of developmental learning, then learners

cannot make use of these structures in authentic communicative situations and avoid them altogether. This becomes obvious when considering the data relating to tense forms. The contrast between *Present Perfect* and *Past Tense*, for example, was one of the last grammar chapters intensively dealt with and practised in the traditional class just before data collection. Data relating to inaccurate use of these forms is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Present Perfect**

	Total	Correct forms		*[INF/PPART]	*[PERF/PAST]	*[PRES; PAST /PERF] etc.
		F	%			
TG	23	0	0	4	12 (⇒ 9 [Inf/Ppart])	7
AG	32	20	62.5	5	2	5

The notation \*[INF/PPART] (Table 3) characterizes structures in which an unmarked *Infinitive* is wrongly used instead of a *Past Participle*, for example:

Ehm, have you buy a present for the boy that you're going to live with?

The notation \*[PERF/PAST] (Table 3) refers to contexts in which the *Present Perfect* was wrongly used instead of the *Past*. In nine out of twelve examples in the TG data the deviant structures additionally lack a *Past Participle* marker, for example:

Yesterday ... we have listen ...

The distribution of deviant and non-deviant forms across learner groups is remarkable in many ways. The peer-to-peer talks of traditional learners contain only four cases in which they tried to - and/or had to - construct a *Present Perfect*, for example:

I play piano one year ago  
[intended meaning: 'I have played the piano for one year']

As indicated above, the low frequency might be interpreted as an avoidance strategy, which is probably also related to a general uncertainty as to the formation and function of *Present Perfect* forms. It seems remarkable that overgeneralized forms of the \*[PERF/PAST]-type are among the more frequent deviations (12 occurrences) in the traditional group despite intensive rule learning (Table 3).

The overall frequencies of *Present Perfect* structures are surprisingly low in the TG group, especially when compared to the AG group. In other words, teaching the forms systematically had neither affected frequency of occurrence nor accuracy rates significantly. This corroborates Pienemann's assumption that premature teaching of complex structures might even have detrimental effects on the acquisition process (Pienemann, 1989).

In view of the semantic and grammatical complexity of the *Present Perfect*, the percentage of correct uses in the AG data is quite astonishing. It should be noted, however, that the majority of correct forms has to be attributed to a few more advanced learners of the AG group.



Another set of data within the LAALE project is based on a C-Test, which is accuracy-focused and yields a measure of general language proficiency. A C-Test can be characterised as a reduced redundancy test and looks something like the example in Figure 4.

What did we do wrong?  
 We are a middle-aged couple with a teenage family. We ha\_\_\_  
 always wor\_\_\_ hard a\_\_\_ our profes\_\_\_ careers a\_\_\_ our  
 jo\_\_\_, have alw\_\_\_ paid o\_\_\_ tax a\_\_\_ tried t\_\_\_ do t\_\_\_  
 best f\_\_\_ our chil\_\_\_. ...

**Figure 4: A C-Test**

Learners are given the title of the text and a first complete sentence. Then every second word is cut in half and the second part is deleted. If there is an odd number of letters, one more letter is deleted. The score is identical to the percentage of correctly reconstructed words, since a C-Test proper consists of 100 distorted words. Table 4 shows results from various classes, traditional as well as autonomous.

**Table 4: C-Test Results**

	n	Number of lessons	Score (%)
AG – DK (grade 7)	21	440	63.5
TG – DK (grade 7)	19	440	54.3
AG – DK (grade 8a)	19	720	77.4
AG – DK (grade 8b)	15	640	77.7
TG - Gym-bilingual	32	680 + 120	78.2

Legend:

AG – DK: Autonomous learners / Danish comprehensive school

TG – DK: Traditional learners / same Danish comprehensive school

TG – Gym-bilingual: Traditional German learners / bilingual *Gymnasium*

The German learners attending bilingual or CLIL courses (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*) had 120 lessons in which English was used as the medium of instruction in subjects like Biology, Geography or History. Only the more gifted *Gymnasium* students choose these courses. This means that even if the yardstick of comparison includes grammatical accuracy the linguistic proficiency of a mixed

ability autonomous class has reached the same level as that of an 'elitist' group of traditionally taught students.

## 6. The Explanation of the Successes

How can the fact be explained that autonomous learners pick up complex grammatical structures as quickly, and often more quickly, than learners who are systematically taught these structures? It is here that theories of second language acquisition and theories of motivation can provide explanations.

### 6.1 Authenticity and the interaction hypothesis

As mentioned above, the autonomous classroom is characterized by the very fact that the interactions are authentic. Whereas traditional classrooms rely on the principle of 'suspension of disbelief', the autonomous classroom under discussion rejects all 'do-as-if' activities. This means, for example, that the teacher does not ask questions which she can answer herself. It also implies that the actions in that classroom are by and large based on free choice - only restricted by the curricular guidelines. This adds, of course, to the intrinsic motivation of the learners. And what is equally important: The learners know that they will only learn the language if and when they use it. It is this insistence on using the target language from the very beginning in authentic communicative interactions which results in communicative, and also grammatical, competence.

What are the insights from second language acquisition research that relate the authenticity of interactions and the use of the target language to language learning?

The SLA theory which can best explain the developmental successes has been termed the Interaction Hypothesis. The theory holds that language learning results from using the language in authentic communicative situations. The seminal statement that is widely assumed to mark the beginning of the Interaction Hypothesis was made in 1978 by Evelyn Hatch:

It is assumed that one first learns how to manipulate structures, that one gradually builds up a repertoire of structures and then, somehow, learns how to put the structures to use in discourse. We would like to consider the possibility that just the reverse happens. One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures develop. (Hatch, 1978, p. 404)

However, similar views were expressed much earlier. Some of the most explicit statements come from the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), who, as early as 1693, wrote:

... the right way of teaching that [foreign] Language [...] is by talking it into Children in constant Conversation, and not by Grammatical Rules. (Locke, 1989, p. 216)

and:

... yet the ordinary way of Learning it [Latin] [...] in short is this. To trouble the Child with no *Grammar* at all, but to have *Latin*, as *English* has been, without the perplexity of Rules, talked into him; for if you will consider it, *Latin* is no more unknown to a Child, when he comes into the World, than *English*: And yet he learns *English* without Master, Rule or Grammar; and so might he Latin too, ... (Locke, 1989, p. 218)

The Interaction Hypothesis, though, is associated with Michael Long. He was the first to come up with a more systematic explanation of the interrelationship between conversational interactions and language acquisition (Long, 1996). When implementing tenets of the Interaction Hypothesis in the foreign language classroom the message is that one should not learn English in order to use it, but to use English in order to learn it (Howatt, 1984).

## 6.2 Reflectivity and awareness-raising

There can be no doubt that the principle of authenticity must be supplemented by the principle of awareness-raising, as mentioned above. Just using the language in communicative situations might lead to some basic communicative competence only (Little, 1996). To prevent this kind of premature fossilization in the linguistic development, the learners must be constantly encouraged to also focus their attention on formal aspects of the target language. This happens, for example, in daily activities when learners share homework, then *Past Tense* forms figure prominently. As soon as they engage in planning what to do next, forms for future reference come into play, and so on. However, it is here that one of the major responsibilities of the teacher sets in. She has to get learners to develop a learning attitude which is reminiscent of a linguistic researcher's or a grammarian's bent of mind. In a word, learners need to be encouraged to also pay attention to formal structures but without being explicitly taught or instructed.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the *grammatical* achievements of autonomous learners. This might be considered a fairly narrow perspective given the importance of *communicative competence* and also in view of general educational objectives. It could, for example, be argued that some of the following motives for developing learner autonomy are even more important:

- The development of self-esteem and self-confidence. On the one hand, it is a prerequisite for developing learner autonomy, but, on the other hand, it also leads to enhanced self-esteem.
- The motives for the *Council of Europe* to promote learner autonomy were mainly political. They had in mind the interest of democratic societies to develop the capacity of their citizens to act as free and self-determining individuals (Holec, 1981).
- In a fast-changing world the need to equip learners for life-long learning is of paramount importance, and having learnt how to learn is an excellent investment for the future.

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## **Part 2**

# **Promoting Learner Autonomy**

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## Developing Learner Autonomy with School Kids: Principles, practices, results

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### Abstract

This paper is based partly on extensive experience in the field and partly on a successful longitudinal research project, the LAALE project (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment), which together provide insights into learner autonomy in the context of secondary school learners. The paper reviews reasons for developing learner autonomy with school-aged learners, outlines important principles related to its implementation in language teaching and learning, and describes how the principles can be put into practice in an institutional context. The paper finishes with a list of pitfalls to be avoided in implementing learner autonomy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Key words:** learner autonomy, principles, LAALE project, Danish learners, primary and secondary language learning, classroom practice

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Give a man a fish, and feed him for a day.

Teach a man to fish, and feed him for life.

(Old Chinese proverb)

## 1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

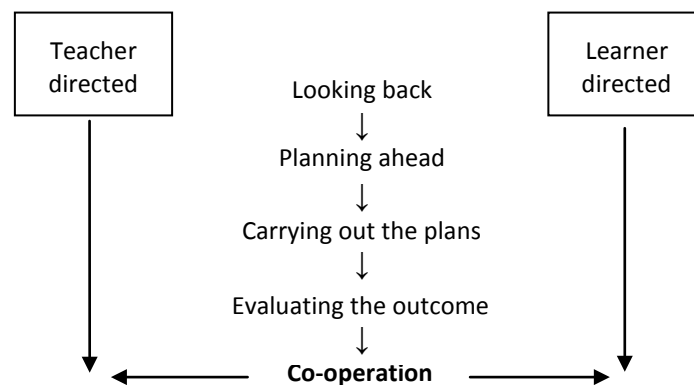
This paper is based on more than 30 years' personal experience, mainly from developing learner autonomy in my own classes with mixed ability students in a Danish comprehensive school south of Copenhagen. I see my publications on the development of learner autonomy as a documentation of a long process and a personal development which hasn't ended yet. This paper summarizes important insights, examples of successful practice, and results from the journey.

After a short description of what, in my view, is meant by the development of learner autonomy, the paper offers reasons for doing so with school kids. These reasons lead automatically on to important principles underlying the implementation of learner autonomy in language teaching and learning. The description of these principles is

followed by an outline of the way they are put into practice in an institutional context. This includes the role of the teacher, the organization of the classroom, useful tools and activity types, tools for evaluative practices, and last, but not least, important issues in connection with parental work. The ensuing list of positive results accomplished from this practice is partly based on a longitudinal research project, the LAALE project (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment) (cf. Legenhausen, 2001, 2003). In conclusion, the paper lists some pitfalls that should be avoided in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. Developing Learner Autonomy in a School Context

People often connect the concept of learner autonomy with chaos and imagine learners doing what they want to do and when they want to do it. Nothing could be more wrong. This paper is dealing with the *development* of learner autonomy. This means that we are *not* talking about learners who from their first language lesson are *autonomous* in the sense that they know what to do and how to go about learning the language. Furthermore, we are talking about the development of autonomy in an *institutional context*. This implies that it is not a question of a *help yourself* - menu for what to do, neither for teachers nor for learners. The content of teaching and learning is subject to the curricular guidelines outlined for the age group of learners in question. Within these constraints, I see the development of learner autonomy as a move from an often totally teacher-directed teaching environment to a possible learner- directed learning environment (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Developing learner autonomy – a simplified model**

The task for the teacher in this connection is two-sided. On the one hand, she has to make the learners *willing* to take over the responsibility for planning their own learning, for carrying out the plans and for evaluating the outcome. At the same time, she has to support them in becoming *capable* of doing so. Experience has shown that it is especially difficult for the teacher *to let go* i.e. pass over responsibility to the learners in this process whereas it seems easier for the learners *to take over*. For both parts it is of utmost importance that they feel secure during the course of action which will have to take place step by step.



### 3. Reasons for Developing Learner Autonomy with School Kids

Before 1973, students in the Danish Folkeskole (primary and secondary school) were streamed after the 7<sup>th</sup> grade (14-year-olds) into A-level classes (strong learners) and B-level classes (weak learners). The streaming was decided by the teachers of the class. However, in 1973 a new Education Act made it possible *not* to stream students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. In that year, it so happened that in my 7<sup>th</sup> form that I had taught English for two years, were two inseparable girls, a very clever girl and a very weak one who even received extra lessons in Danish and Mathematics. These two girls had in their English lessons shown me the advantages of unequal learners working together, and the opportunities that such pair work offered to learning. I was therefore quite optimistic as regards having to cope with a whole class of mixed-ability students. In order not to separate the two girls, I therefore applied for permission from the Ministry of Education to keep the class un-streamed in their 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> years of English. I got the permission. The interest of the Ministry was to see if it was possible to take into account the different levels of mixed-ability learners in an un-streamed class, also at intermediate level. I was, on the one hand, forced to get *all* my learners actively and positively involved in their own learning. On the other hand, I believed that this was the only answer to coping with the differences in the class. At that time (1973), I found support in this view, partly in Carl Rogers' *Freedom to Learn* (Rogers, 1969), partly in Vygotsky's ideas about the social aspects of learning (Vygotsky, 1962). A few years later Douglas Barnes' book *From Communication to Curriculum* (Barnes, 1976) offered additional support.

Two points Barnes makes particularly reinforced my views about getting the individual learners actively engaged in their own learning as well as focusing on learning rather than teaching. Firstly, he emphasizes the fact that it is the learner who does the learning, based on the knowledge that he or she brings to the learning environment:

To learn is to develop relationships between what the learner knows already and the new knowledge presented to him, and this can only be done by the learner himself. (Barnes 1976, p. 81)

This also stresses the fact that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers believe themselves to be teaching. Secondly, Barnes makes a useful distinction between what he calls *school knowledge* and *action knowledge*:

School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. Action knowledge is different. We use it for our own purposes; we incorporate it into our view of the world, and use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. (Barnes, 1976, p. 81)

This stresses the necessity for establishing a learning environment where our learners achieve action knowledge, i.e. knowledge and competences for learning, also outside school. Moreover, his point supports the truth of the old Chinese proverb about lifelong learning cited at the beginning of this paper.

## 4. Implementing Learner Autonomy in an Institutional Context: Important principles

Even though convinced that I was on the right track, it was not *that* easy to get a whole group of 15-year-olds to work optimally. I was up against the tired-of-school attitude that many boys at this age show, so the question was how to get *all* the students to be active in their English lessons. This is what I did: After having finished a completely teacher-directed project with many bored and often inactive students, I asked the class what *they* would like to do next within the possibilities and constraints given - the available materials, the outlined possible activities, and the curricular demands. In other words, I forced them to be involved in the planning of the next project by requesting them to come up with suggestions for what to do (for details, see Dam, 1995, 2ff).

The result was a success. By choosing what to do, even within the limited possibilities given, the learners took active part in their own learning. By working in groups, they were also more involved than normally in carrying out the work undertaken and they obviously felt co-responsible for its outcome. Furthermore, their personal involvement in their own learning provided a good foundation for evaluating the process during and after the project. Even at a very small scale, this first attempt at passing over responsibility to the learners revealed some important principles for developing learner autonomy in an institutional context.

### 4.1 The importance of choice

First of all there is no doubt that being given a choice *motivates* learners. Even a limited choice obviously had an impact on my learners. This view is of course supported by the literature on motivational research (cf. Ushioda, 1996, 2006). In addition, having to choose *requires reflection* (cf. Little, 2006), which again *heightens awareness of learning*, both are valuable and important side-effects of choice. Making a choice makes the learners *feel responsible* and being allowed to make choices and to have a say in one's own learning process supports *self-esteem*.

### 4.2 Clear guidelines for the learners for what to do

In an institutional context learners are not free to choose whatever they want to do. The curricular guidelines have to be followed. The important thing when developing learner autonomy is to make these guidelines known to the learners. This also includes any demands in connection with tests or exams. In order to make the learners *willing* to take over, it is vital that they feel secure by knowing what is expected and demanded of them.

### 4.3 Focus on learning rather than teaching

One difficulty in thinking about knowledge is that it is both 'out there' in the world and 'in here' in ourselves. The fact that it is 'out there' and known to a teacher doesn't mean that he can give it to children merely by telling them. Getting the knowledge from 'out there' to 'in here' is something for the child himself to do: the art of teaching is how to help him do it. (Barnes, 1976, p. 79)

In the traditional teacher-directed teaching environment, teachers ask themselves: *How do I best teach this or that?* In a learner-centred learning environment, teachers ask themselves: *How do I best support my learners in learning this or that?* In other words, there

is a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning on the part of the teacher. In the first situation, teachers focus on how best to pass over school knowledge to learners. In the second situation, teachers consider how best to engage learners in developing their action knowledge by activating their existing knowledge. This again has an impact on the activities that teachers introduce into the learning environment. They have to consider activities where all the learners have the opportunity of actively taking part. A rule of thumb in this connection is to make sure that an activity gives scope for any learner to add to the activity as well as to gain from the activity (examples can be seen in section 5.4).

#### 4.4 Authenticity in the language classroom

You are now entering a foreign language classroom,  
forget that you are normal! (Dam, 2001, p. 47)

This quote could be placed outside the door of many language classes, because when entering the room learners will experience things that will not happen in real life. In a class of beginners, for example, the learners are practising the first phrases in the coursebook: *What's your name? My name is ...!* The problem is that these learners have known each other for several years! In one of the following lessons it is time to practise vocabulary, and you will see the teacher holding a pencil in her hand, asking a learner: *What is this?* The learner answers: *Pencil.* But the teacher is not satisfied. She says: *Whole sentence!* The learner then says: *It's a pencil, Miss.* The teacher is now satisfied, whereupon she places the pencil on the table and asks another learner: *Where is the pencil?* This learner has by now learned that answers must be whole sentences and answers: *It's on the table, Miss.* The teacher is satisfied: *Good!* Both examples are supposed to be authentic communication in the target language, but they are not. Essentially, it is a case of sentence drilling in the first example and checking of vocabulary and adverbs in the second one. If we want our learners to be genuine users of the target language, including outside the classroom, we must create a learning environment that is *real life* in its own right. This means that ongoing communication between teacher and learners and between learners must be authentic. This implies that the participants act and speak as *themselves* within their respective roles in the teaching/learning environment.

#### 4.5 The importance of evaluation

Evaluation forms the very *pivot of learner autonomy* (Dam, 1995). It is well-known that the learner does not necessarily learn what the teacher believes herself to be teaching. On the contrary, as is pointed out by Douglas Barnes:

What will the pupils take away with them? It will certainly be different from what the teacher believes himself to be teaching. Every pupil in the class will go away with a version of the lesson, which in some respects is different from all the other pupils' versions, because what each pupil brings to the classroom will be different. (Barnes, 1976, p. 21)

In order to find out what learners have learnt, they have to be asked. However, many teachers avoid involving their learners in such undertakings, because they often feel that time constraints, either enforced by a coursebook or by the syllabus, do not leave space enough. Besides, teachers in many countries have to cope with national

tests and official controls, which add to the time problem, and which at the same time serve as an alibi for skipping daily evaluations.

Therefore, in order to get teachers to involve their learners regularly and systematically in reflection, evaluation, and assessment, it is important to provide them with reasons as well as tools for doing so. Apart from the reason mentioned by Barnes, it is essential that learners get regular and palpable evidence that they are making progress (not just when tested). Evaluative positive feedback of this kind will lead to sustained motivation. It is equally important for teachers themselves to be able to regularly evaluate the outcome of their teaching. Finally, because evaluation demands reflection it produces awareness of the elements involved in learning, a prerequisite for active involvement in further planning.

## 5. Putting Principles into Practice

Developing learner autonomy is a long and never-ending process for teacher and learners alike. In this process, the teacher creates a learning environment where the learners gradually are made (co-)responsible for their own learning. In this section I will mention some elements and tools that I have found useful in this process.

### 5.1 The role of the teacher

Over the years, the role of the teacher as being all-important in the development of learner autonomy became clearer and clearer to me. I realized, and accepted, that basically she is responsible for this process as well as its result (Dam, 2003). First of all, it is vital that she sees and accepts the importance of a shift of focus from teaching to a focus on learning. Furthermore, she is responsible for providing various options for the learners to choose from in their course of learning (*cf. the importance of choice*). This could be choosing personal aims, activities, partners, organization of work, or ways of evaluation. In this connection, the teacher is responsible for presenting her learners with the demands outlined in the curricular guidelines for their learning within which they can set their individual goals. It is equally important that any restrictions for their freedom to choose and act are made clear (*cf. clear guidelines for the learners for what to do*). It is also her responsibility to establish some kind of transparent structure for a lesson or a teaching/learning sequence which the learners can take over, partly or completely, in due course. In my case, I divided a teaching/learning sequence into three sections:

- teacher's time
- learners' time
- together time

The time allocated to the three sections varies. Teacher's time is often used for catching up on loose ends from the previous lesson or for introducing new activities or organizational forms to be tried out. When the learners are well into managing their own learning and have taken over more and more responsibility for being in charge of their own work, the normal thing is to have a short *teacher's time* at the beginning of a week. By then, most of a lesson will be taken up by the *learners' time*. A lesson or a week will finish with *together time* where the whole class is joined for presentations, reflections, evaluations, etc. (Dam, 1995, 1999).

One of the most important roles for the teacher in the language classroom, however, is to be the user of the target language from the very beginning and to establish situations for authentic language use. Examples can be observed in the DVD *It's Up To Yourself If You Want To Learn* (Dam & Lentz, 1998) of:

- Negotiating what to do (teacher/learners, learners among themselves)
- Planning work (teacher/learners, learners among themselves)
- Evaluating work done (learners among themselves, teacher/learners)
- Asking for or giving help and advice (learner/teacher, learner/learner)

In short, it is the teacher's role to establish an environment where the learners are being prepared for taking over responsibility for their own learning (Figure 1). During this process, it is crucial that she remembers to say:

- What she is doing
- Why she is doing it
- Which results she expects from her initiatives

## 5.2 The organization of the classroom

Seating in groups has proved useful for a number of reasons when developing learner autonomy, especially in language teaching and learning. It supports the social aspect of learning. It makes the organization of pair work and group work easier, which facilitates peer-tutoring. It promotes independence of the teacher. It is easier to get learners to use the foreign language directly with a partner or in a group as it is less threatening than speaking up in class (for examples see: Dam, 1995, 1999).

## 5.3 The use of logbooks, portfolios, and posters

Until 1984, my learners used loose sheets of paper for their notes in the English lessons. The notes were kept in the learners' files, if they got into the file at all (a problem for the weak learners). This system was not at all satisfactory, neither for the learners nor for me. However, this was changed in 1984 when a Dutch colleague showed the audience some logbooks from his learners at a conference in Copenhagen. Lovely personal books filled with notes from the lessons as well as illustrations were put on display. I took the idea back to my class and promised my learners that if they were willing to try out the use of a logbook, we would evaluate their usefulness for our purposes after a period of time. After two months we listed the advantages with a book rather than loose papers. It was agreed that having *everything* in one book made life easier. First of all, it provided an overview of progress made, for the learners themselves, for the teacher, and for the parents. Furthermore, the book documented the *learning process* and gave space for direct and authentic communication between learners and teacher. Ever since, the use of logbooks in connection with the development of learner autonomy has been a vital and indispensable tool for me and my learners (Dam, 2006). Later, I introduced the portfolio into my English classes. It contained the *products* deriving from work carried out during the lesson or at home. It was a collection of stories, essays, and tests which also provided essential documentation for learning and progress made.

Over the years, the lay-out as well as the contents of the logbooks and portfolios has been adjusted to current needs. In later years, I have asked my learners to comply with the following demands as regards the lay-out of the logbook:

- Number the pages so that it is easy to refer to different passages in your logbook

- Make margins to give space for me to ask questions or to make comments on your work
- I want your logbook to look tidy. This includes readable hand-writing if you want my help

As regards the contents, I have outlined the following *musts*:

- *Start* the lesson by entering day and date in your logbook
- *During* a lesson, enter step by step what you are doing, i.e. which activities you are involved in
- *At the end* of a lesson enter homework to be done as well as an evaluation of the day which could include *things I have learned*

If using an electronic logbook, the demands will of course be different, but guidelines are advisable all the same.

The third tool for visualizing and documenting the learning process is the use of posters, which are displayed in the classroom. Posters are placed on top of each other under various headings:

- Plans (for lessons, for group work – who does what and with whom)
- Ideas (for activities to be undertaken, for homework to choose from)
- Things to remember / demands (good expressions, grammar rules, an overview of dates for handing in things)
- Things we have experienced (criteria for a good talk, a good presentation, a good group work)

#### 5.4 Activities in the autonomous language classroom

The teacher is responsible for introducing activities which conform to the principles mentioned above, i.e. activities to be taken over by the learners. First and foremost, an activity must give space for differentiated input as well as differentiated outcome (for examples see, Dam, 1995, 36ff). This means that a weak learner as well as a strong learner feels challenged without being threatened, and that both types of learners gain from the activity.

In addition, the use of the target language is essential. The aim is therefore to propose activities where the learners are engaged in authentic language use among themselves. In many coursebooks, activities deal with the *reproduction* of language. An example is the traditional question and answer activities where learners are asked to answer questions on a text. In most cases, the answers can be found even without understanding the text or the question. By contrast, learners could be asked to formulate their own questions or discussion points in connection with a text, questions that can be worked on within a group. Other useful activities along the same lines, i.e. authentic language use and language *production*, are:

- Small talk with a partner (2 minutes' talk )
- Make a play (free production, or based on a cartoon, picture story, poem or a story)
- Make a radio programme / make a TV programme / make a PowerPoint presentation / set up a talk show
- Give a talk
- Text production in pairs or small groups

Another way of getting the learners actively involved in their own learning while at the same time using the target language is to let them produce their own materials to be used by themselves and their peers in the lessons. Examples are:

- Word cards with words that the learners want to learn (picture on one side/word at the other side or L2 word on one side/L1 word or explanation of word on the other side)
- Games (dominoes, board games, quiz games)
- Small books to be used as extra readers by peers

Apart from supporting authentic language use, the activities mentioned above also meet the demand for differentiation referred to at the beginning.

### 5.5 Tools for evaluative practices

Evaluation does not necessarily demand a lot of time. What is important is that it is done on a regular and daily basis, and space is set aside for it. The examples below can easily be entered into the learners' logbooks at the end of a lesson within a few minutes when the teacher evaluates the day in her own logbook. Simple forms of evaluation can be:

- Smileys ☺ ☺ ☺
- Graded lines indicating the value of what is being evaluated (0-----|-----10)
- Written accounts (good things, things to be improved)

Whichever type is used, reasons have to be given for the evaluation, for example: *I have given the activity 3 smileys because ...or I have given our group work an eight because ...* Furthermore, it is equally important that the written, individual evaluations are followed up orally, either in pairs, in plenary, or directly between teacher and learner.

In addition to these daily evaluations, the evaluative practices known from the traditional classroom such as tests, markings, and official exams will of course also take place in the autonomous classroom. A difference might be that in the autonomous classroom a natural thing would be to let the learners evaluate their own performance before they get the results. Good practice is also to let them mark their own essays before the teacher does. Learners can also produce their own tests. Learners' self-assessments are very reliable when the learners are used to evaluating (Dam & Legenhausen, 1999).

### 5.7 Involvement of parents

Developing learner autonomy is new and often strange to most parents who are used to a traditional teaching/learning environment themselves. Detailed information about the set-up of the English lessons is therefore necessary. The information, which can be in the form of a letter at the beginning of term, should give the parents an insight into the structure and contents of the on-going teaching/learning including:

- What happens in class (a plan for a period, activities)
- Why it is done (the curricular guidelines)
- How it is done (e.g. the use of logbooks and portfolios, homework to be done)
- What is expected of parents (taking part in their children's learning / showing interest in their homework)

Preferably, the letter should be followed up by a parents' meeting where the parents might try out some of the activities taking place at beginners' level, such as the production of word cards. It is my experience that this makes the parents feel at ease. However, it should not be a one-time event. Parents should regularly be informed and be encouraged to follow the ongoing work via the logbooks. Some teachers might also prefer to use the logbook as a tool for communication between parents and the school.

## 6. Positive Results from Developing Learner Autonomy

The work with the development of learner autonomy for more than three decades has been a success. Apart from learners with a high communicative proficiency (at different levels) the result has been learners who have:

- Developed enhanced self-esteem
- Acquired an evaluative competence of self and others
- Learned how to learn and to accept responsibility
- Gained social competence by experiencing social forms of learning
- Prepared for life-long learning

This is what two 15-year-old students wrote in their final evaluation (Dam & Gabrielsen, 1988, p. 20):

I think that we have grown better at planning our own time. We know more about what we need to do and how to go about it. ....Evaluation also helped us. It is like going through things again.

I have learned English, planning my own work, cooperation. .... Have had and used an independent responsibility. Have taken part in the planning of learning (it makes one want to do, learn something for oneself).

For more examples of positive results see: Dam (1999, 2006), Dam & Legenhausen (2010) and Legenhausen (1999, 2001).

## 7. Conclusion: Pitfalls to be avoided in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

There is no doubt that the journey which started in 1973 has been a success, but also hard and continuous work for me and my learners. For other teachers who want to try it out let me stress that developing learner autonomy is *not*:

- A do-as-you-like undertaking for the learners
- About learners learning on their own
- An abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher (Dam, 2003; Little, 1991)
- Something teachers do to learners, but something teachers do together with learners (Dam, 1999).

Finally, from my own experience, let me mention a few pitfalls encountered by language teachers wanting to develop learner autonomy. They:

- Lack sufficient confidence in their learners' ability to be able to take over responsibility



- Forget about being authentic, for example, by asking questions that they can answer themselves
- Start teaching instead of supporting learning
- Find excuses for not being able to develop autonomy, such as time constraints and having to use a coursebook.

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## EFL Learner Autonomy as it Emerges in Drama Projects

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### Abstract

While drama has been recognized as a valuable educational tool in L2 learning situations, attention tends to focus on how it can affect learner motivation (Hsueh, 2008), language proficiency (Hsu, 2006), and critical thinking skills (Murillo, 2007). What of its impact on learner autonomy? It is not enough simply to intuit that drama activities help students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. This paper outlines the rationale and contents of a drama project recently conducted with secondary EFL learners in Japan. Assumptions underpinning the project included that learners should engage in “whole language learning” and real social practice through authentic, meaningful activities. The teachers supported students through a sequence of high-, mid-, and low-structured activities, as well as on-going reflection, their stance shifting from “instructor” to “facilitator” (Little, 1995) and finally to “learner.” Students ultimately took the initiative in developing their roles and designing, rehearsing, and performing scenes. This paper offers narrative data and samples of student work demonstrating that the project not only advanced the students’ L2 proficiency, but promoted both their creativity and autonomy.

**Key words:** task-based learning, learner autonomy, drama, situated learning, reflection, appropriation, communication strategy, social practice, EFL, Japanese secondary students

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### 1. Introduction

Drama has been recognized as a valuable educational tool in a range of L2 learning situations, and for a variety of reasons. Hsu (2006) and Miccoli (2003), for example, note that drama promotes second language proficiency, while Wheeler (2001) draws attention to its role in helping students integrate diverse language skills. Dodson (2002) points to how drama advances L2 learners’ oral fluency, particularly conversation.

In addition to these linguistic considerations, drama's influence on certain socio-affective aspects of L2 learning has also been acknowledged. Bräuer (2002) reflects on how drama advances learners' cross-cultural awareness, while Murillo (2007) concentrates on ways learners develop critical thinking skills through participating in drama activities. Others have directed their focus toward ways in which drama encourages self-confidence and reduces learner anxiety (Kao & O'Neill, 1998), and how incorporating drama into an EFL curriculum helps establish a motivational environment (Hsueh, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

There is, however, a dearth of research on the impact of drama on learner autonomy. This paper seeks to address how learner autonomy can emerge through preparation for and participation in dramatic performances. The rationale and contents of a project recently conducted with secondary EFL learners in Japan will be outlined. Assumptions underpinning the project included that learners should engage in "whole language learning" and real social practice through authentic, meaningful activities. With this in mind, the instructors designed a sequence of high-, mid-, and low-structured activities, as well as ongoing reflection, their stance shifting from "instructors" to "facilitators" (Little, 1995) and finally to "members of the learning community" (Suzuki & Collins, 2007). Students ultimately took the initiative in developing their roles and designing, rehearsing, and performing scenes. This paper offers narrative data and samples of student work demonstrating that the project not only advanced the students' L2 proficiency, but also promoted both their creativity and autonomy.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Situation in Japan's secondary school English classes

The approach most commonly used by secondary school English teachers in Japan is a form of grammar-translation known as *yakudoku* (Gorsuch, 1998; Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001). One of the assumptions underpinning *yakudoku* is that English is a body of knowledge to be memorized, rather than a tool for communication (Suzuki & Collins, 2007). Once this information has been translated through bottom-up processing into Japanese, it can be analysed and finally understood.

Other characteristics of typical *yakudoku* classes include unstated learning goals, highly structured lessons, fossilized teacher and student roles, and Japanese as the language of instruction. Most teachers realize that their classes contradict the English-for-communication and cross-cultural goals stated in the Ministry of Education's Course of Study (MoE-Japan, 2008). Pressure to teach to university entrance exams and a lack of teacher collegiality and reflection, however, prevent many from exploring ways to nurture learner autonomy (Collins & Nakamura, 2007).

### 2.2. The 16<sup>th</sup> annual Tokai University English Olympics

The Tokai University English Olympics provides a rare chance for selected students to experience a meaningful communication project in an intensive seminar environment. Held during the 2009 summer vacation at the Tokai University Tsumagoi Training Center in Gunma Prefecture, the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Olympics was attended by 21 students from Tokai University-affiliated high schools who qualified for the event through a selective examination. The instructor team consisted of seven

teachers from Tokai University's Research Institute of Educational Development (RIED) and the university's Foreign Language Center (FLC), as well as five English teachers from Tokai-affiliated high schools. Additionally, three Tokai University exchange students from Australia, Kazakhstan, and Sri Lanka joined the team.

### 3. Establishing and Maintaining Autonomous Conditions

#### 3.1 Educational objectives

First and foremost, the English Olympics is a chance for students to advance all four English macroskills as well as their facility with new vocabulary, idioms, and grammar structures. Learner motivation to tackle these objectives is at least partially contingent, however, on a sense that the learners are engaged in meaningful activities and that their own roles in these activities are clear (Engeström, 1987).

Drawing on their knowledge of what secondary students learn – and do not learn – in English and other subjects, the instructor team began by confirming communication and “whole person learning” goals (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nunn, 2006) to supplement the above linguistic objectives. These included students: drawing upon and using their past experiences to imagine new situations; engaging in real social practice (Little, 1991) and whole language learning to grasp the context and meaningfulness of the activity; and understanding the role of the English used in the activity.

At the same time, the instructors stated their intent to participate fully as members of the learning community. By acting as mentors, they would be able to guide students through a sequence of activities, helping them find and reflect on the meaning within each activity (Vygotsky, 1978).

#### 3.2 Drama as an educational tool

With these educational assumptions in mind, the instructor team determined that the 2009 Olympics would feature a drama project. Sessions in this project would help students approach their performances from the perspective of actors rather than as language learners, effecting a shift from English mastery as an end in itself toward English as a means of achieving the ends of the dramatic characters (Fine, 2009). The team briefly considered asking students to write original scripts in order to foster their autonomy and enable them to construct their characters' identities as deeply as possible. Given the seminar's limited timeframe, however (Figure 1), this option was impractical. It was decided, then, that students would perform four selected scenes from the movie *Back to the Future*. The instructors felt that secondary students would find it relatively easy to project themselves into characters from this movie, given that much of *Back to the Future* is set in and around a high school.

Each scene group included four or five students, one native English teacher (NET), and a Japanese teacher of English (JTE). Three of the four groups also included a foreign exchange student.

#### 3.3 Task sequencing

With the educational objectives and final student task (the performance of the dramatic scenes) in place, the team turned to sequencing communication activities that would allow students to take more initiative increasingly over the course of the

high-, mid- and low-structured phases of the Olympics. In each phase, sessions and tasks were needed that would establish and maintain a productive learning environment, while advancing the students' linguistic knowledge and communicative competencies (Savignon & Wang, 2003).

Time	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
9:00		Team-building	Drama 5: Interpreting the scene: Lines	Drama 8: Rehearsing	Drama 11: Reflecting
10:00					
11:00		Drama 2: Music, Improvisation, Feeling			
12:00		Lunch			
13:00		Free time / Preparation time			
14:00	Introduction, Survey 1	Drama 3: Understanding the story and scene	Drama 6: Cross- cultural workshop	Drama 9: Dress rehearsal	Assessment: Speaking, Writing
15:00					
16:00					
17:00	Free time / Preparation time				
18:00	Dinner				
19:00	Drama 1: Exploring movement and voice	Drama 4: Understanding the script, building the scene	Drama 7: Interpreting the scene: Character	Drama 10: Performing	Closure
20:00					
21:00	Reflection 1	Reflection 2	Reflection 3	Reflection 4	Survey 2

**Figure 1: 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Tokai University English Olympics Schedule**

### The high-structured phase

In the first, high-structured phase of the project, both the content and approaches were determined almost entirely by the instructors and teaching materials. By design, the students' autonomy was relatively low during the Drama 1 to Drama 3 sessions while they began their "cognitive apprenticeship" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

Materials in the high-structured phase established the educational environment: the dramatic scenes themselves. They achieved this by introducing background cultural knowledge through a slide presentation and a music response worksheet, which helped the students understand the setting of the movie: American suburban life in the 1950s and 1980s. Students were also given a written synopsis of the movie and their own dramatic scene scripts. These provided the students with sufficient input to form and communicate their own original ideas and opinions in later sessions.

Some materials in this phase focused on the target language, introducing and explaining discrete vocabulary items. Lines from the movie were recycled for slightly different purposes on each worksheet. Additionally, Japanese glosses were provided

where necessary, allowing students to bypass their dictionaries and interact almost entirely in English during the sessions.

### **The mid-structured phase**

The instructors began sharing more control with the students in the mid-structured phase of the seminar, staying flexible enough to “make moment-by-moment decisions according to the needs and wishes of each learner” (Aoki, 2002, p. 117). As instructor roles shifted from “teacher” to “facilitator/supporter,” the students were invited to take greater responsibility for creative thinking and decision-making.

Materials for the Drama 4 to Drama 7 sessions encouraged the students to continue their teambuilding through brainstorming and discussion. The worksheets asked them to negotiate division of labour within their scene groups. Additionally, they were free to interpret and describe their own characters in original ways and to articulate their ideas about their characters’ psychological and physical aspects.

### **The low-structured phase**

In the low-structured phase, learner autonomy is at its highest, with students independently exploring, learning, and interacting with others around them. Second language learning projects tend to feature fewer opportunities for learner autonomy than those introduced in other subjects. Nonetheless, it is during this phase that “real” learning is found to take place, with the teacher’s stance shifting from “facilitator/supporter” to “member of the learning community.”

Materials created for the Drama 8 and Drama 9 sessions enabled students to design and construct original sets, props, and costumes for their scenes. The fact that they were not shown *Back to the Future* until after their own final performances promoted their legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as they constructed their characters within the context of the “world” they were autonomously visualizing and assembling.

## **3.4 Reflection**

A key aspect of the 2009 English Olympics was a series of Reflection Sheets. Completed by the students each evening, the sheets mirrored each day’s session materials, Day 1’s being the highest-structured and Day 4’s the lowest. Rather than focusing on linguistic accuracy, the sheets provided students with opportunities to internalize the input from the day. This included the content as well as the externalization experienced through interacting with others. The Reflection Sheets also allowed students to reorganize information from various resources such as the synopsis, scripts, and session materials and use it to express original ideas.

## **3.5 Assessment**

On Day 5, students were given an assessment with two components: writing and speaking. Both components were designed to help students recycle the target language introduced over the course of the Olympics, as well as the communication experiences and skills they had built through the various activities. To demonstrate their ability to do so, students were expected to draw upon the content of the various resources introduced during the project, including the written synopsis, scene scripts, session materials, Reflection Sheets, and their own notes. The instructors also intended the assessments to provide data demonstrating whether students had truly appropriated the target language and content or merely memorized it.

For the writing task, students were asked to imagine themselves as Marty, the chief protagonist of *Back to the Future*. They were to write a short magazine article entitled “My Father George: Lessons in Life,” drawing on transcripts of key dialog from five pivotal scenes. They were also invited to refer to the synopsis, scripts, and all session materials while creating notes for their article, but were to use only these notes when writing the article itself. In evaluating students’ success in this task, one JTE and one NET read the final written output, and assessed whether students had sufficiently illustrated their points with specific examples and articulated how they felt about the events they were describing.

In the speaking assessment, students were interviewed by a JTE-NET pair, answering content-based questions about the story and the characters, including their motivations and relationships. After some debate, it was decided that the students would respond to a first set of questions as themselves, and a second set of questions while “in character.” Students were asked to bring a prop from their scene or a costume article that they had worn, in order to help them get into and stay in character. Immediately following each interview, the evaluators discussed and graded the test using the following criteria:

1. The student’s output was informative
2. The student was in character for the “performance” element
3. The responses were logical
4. The responses were understandable, in terms of pronunciation, rhythm, and stress

## 4. Outcomes

During the English Olympics drama project, students were offered opportunities for progressively higher autonomy, and they responded by taking the initiative (or not) in a variety of ways. Types of emerging autonomy observed during the project included:

1. Recycling target language for self-expression
2. Communication, negotiation, and decision-making
3. Strategizing to maximize meaningfulness and output
4. Exploration, improvisation, and creativity

In tracking how autonomy emerged during the project, and providing concrete examples, it is useful to focus on three specific students (referred to hereafter as Student A, Student B and Student C) from three different high schools, who participated as members of the same scene group. Although all three students were considered top English students from their respective schools, they entered the Olympics with distinct differences in their skill sets. Student A was a returnee who had lived in the United States and was relatively strong in all four macroskills, whereas Students B and C entered the Olympics with fewer English communication skills than many of the other students.

### 4.1 Reflection outcomes

Students were given up to one hour each evening for completing the day’s written Reflection Sheet, and afforded complete autonomy with regard to how much or little of the hour they used. Although the time students chose to spend may have depended in part on the nature of the tasks and the fact that the Reflection Sheets constituted 20% of their overall evaluation, their output suggests that the deeper into



the project the students progressed, the more actively they applied themselves to reflection. Almost all of the students spent at least 45 minutes completing their Reflection Sheets on Days 2, 3, and 4, with many using the full hour allocated.

Autonomy was also encouraged by the Reflection Sheet instructions, which were deliberately open-ended with regard to the type and amount of detail that students might choose to include in their responses. When asked to draw pictures representing aspects of their characters' lives and relationships, some students created elaborate, manga-like drawings, often including captions or dialog. When asked to describe their characters in words, some extrapolated meaningful, original details about the dramatic situations and roles.

Starting with the Day 2 Reflection Sheets, a trend began to emerge contradicting the expectations of student output based on the results of the qualifying examination. Some students with comparatively advanced macroskills were producing less than their peers, in terms of both quantity and quality. Student A's descriptions of illustrations, for example, were typically simple statements, often of what was visibly obvious ("George and Lorraine are kissing"), whereas both Students B and C wrote consistently longer and more detailed descriptions, recycling target language and touching on relevant background information, character traits, relationships, and feelings ("George has a lot of problems. I want a girlfriend. I can't do work well. Suddenly, George's boss appear [sic]. George is surprised and scared").

By Day 3, some students showed signs of exploring their dramatic roles more effectively than others. Again, those students making the most of the dramatic materials and opportunities for autonomy were not always the ones predicted to do so based on their English-language skills. For example, while Student A continued to write about her character using the third-person voice, Student C was now consistently referring to her character in the first person, suggesting a comparatively high degree of identification with the role. When asked to draw a picture of her character's face, Student A drew relatively generic, nondescript features, while Student C drew pursed lips, worried eyebrows, and a prominent pair of spectacles, indicating the shy and intellectual nature of her character. These facial features, in particular the spectacles, were nowhere mentioned in the script, but were inventions by Student C. When given opportunities to work autonomously, some students seemed to find ways to strategize around their own L2 limitations in order to communicate their messages.

## 4.2 Performance outcomes

Students were not told that they would be performing scenes from *Back to the Future* until they had arrived at the Olympics and they were not shown the movie until after their final performances. These decisions were made in order to avoid exposing the students to what they might construe as models they should imitate. It was hoped that avoiding such exposure would facilitate original interpretations of the characters.

In the authors' experience, rehearsals and performances are natural opportunities for actors to take initiative, even within the framework of a scene's scripted lines and practiced movements, as performers must adapt immediately, spontaneously, and autonomously to the constantly evolving circumstances around them, including the live reactions of their fellow players and the audience. Autonomy might emerge

through something as subtle as a character's glance or facial expression in response to something another character has said or done.

Occasionally, students went a step further, improvising lines which was a remarkable act of courage, given that they were operating in English, sometimes in front of a large group of people. Student B, for example, had a "breakthrough moment" when he improvised a line during rehearsal. At the end of the scene, set in a café, the protagonist Marty exits, leaving Student B's character, the owner of the café, alone on the stage. As one run-through ended, Student B, apparently feeling that the climax of the scene lacked punch, spontaneously called out after Marty, "Hey! You forgot to pay!" The line, both humorous and logically correct for the scene, drew immediate laughter and applause from onlookers. Clearly delighted by this response, Student B decided to retain the line both in subsequent rehearsals and in the final performance, and secured his fellow performers' approval of the new line. On his Day 4 Reflection Sheet, he cited this line as his favourite in the scene. He also became noticeably more outgoing in his English-language interactions with other students after this breakthrough.

Rehearsals also provide rich opportunities for actors to explore non-verbal ways of communicating character, motivation, and emotion. While Student C's pronunciation was not always clear, she developed physical mannerisms such as a bowed head, slumped back, and timid way of moving, in order to convey the introverted, shy nature of her dramatic character. She also designed and created a costume communicating her character's awkwardness. The costume included an uncomfortably tight jacket and necktie, as well as the spectacles she had envisioned on her Reflection Sheet, which she constructed from painted cardboard. Although Student A and others spoke their lines more fluently, Student C's creativity won her the award for Best Individual Performance out of all the Olympics scenes.

### 4.3 Assessment outcomes

#### **Writing assessment**

The task structure of the 90-minute Writing Assessment on Day 5 allowed students to demonstrate whether they could appropriately use target vocabulary and expressions from memory. Students were also asked to illustrate their points with specific examples and to describe how they felt about the events they had described.

Average articles addressed specific episodes from the story, were written appropriately in the first-person voice, and included descriptions of the author's feelings, but also tended to use relatively large chunks of language and structure copied verbatim from the synopsis. Above-average articles, on the other hand, appropriated language and concepts from the synopsis, using them in unexpected, yet appropriate ways; focused on the significance to the author of the events described; and vividly articulated the author's feelings about those events. Ten papers were evaluated as average, an impressive seven papers as above average, and only four as below average.

For students with relatively weak L2 reading and writing skills, the writing assessment offered less opportunity to strategize around their limitations. Student C, for example, had some difficulty articulating her theme clearly, and produced less than one A4 page of text, a relatively small amount. However, in this short text, the keyword "courage," introduced in the synopsis, appeared three times. Although her

essay lacked clarity and cogency, her decision to emphasize the word “courage” through repetition helped Student C to establish *courage* as the main theme of her text, and of the story of *Back to the Future*.

Student B struck upon parallel structure as a means of overcoming L2 limitations and communicating his point. In order to show that the relationship between his father George and the bully Biff had not changed in 30 years, Student B employed an exact repetition of words and sentence structure: in 1955, “I could see young my father. I was happy, but... young Biff came here. And Biff made him to do Biff’s homework,” while in 1985, “His boss was Biff... And Biff made him to do Biff’s reports.” Although a similar parallel structure is employed in the film, no particular attention was drawn to it as a dramatic device in either the sessions or the writing assessment prompt. Student B autonomously identified and employed the structure as a communication strategy. Student B also recycled words and idioms from the synopsis in an essay that filled two pages.

Although Student A’s response was also almost two pages in length, she tended not to draw upon target language, even when it would have been appropriate. Instead, she drew upon vocabulary that she apparently knew from her experiences living overseas. This vocabulary was often misspelled, suggesting that she was transcribing phonetically based on her knowledge of the spoken words. Given a choice between new language and known vocabulary, Student A chose to use the easier, familiar vocabulary. On the other hand, Student B may not have had access to a mental bank of appropriate vocabulary, and so was in a sense “forced” to use the new target expressions, although he was creative in employing them.

Student A’s relatively strong writing ability did position her to take her essay a step further than students with less advanced skills, enabling her in the conclusion of her essay to explore how things might have been different if George had never stood up to Biff. This type of hypothetical analysis was not explicitly requested in the writing assessment prompt, and Student A’s autonomous decision to apply her skills toward this sophisticated, unexpected approach earned her higher marks.

### **Speaking assessment**

The ten-minute Speaking Assessment followed the Writing Assessment on Day 5. Interview prompts gave students an opportunity to demonstrate their grasp of character motivations and relationships from an objective standpoint, as well as to show how well they understood the subjective viewpoint of the character they had played in the scene by responding to certain prompts “in character.”

In average interviews, students recycled some target language and drew upon the content of the story, scenes, and sessions, but occasionally lapsed in their logic and/or intelligibility, and fell in and out of character during the “performance” portion of the interview. The best interviewees responded clearly and logically, providing specific, pertinent examples from the scenes and sessions, and were able to improvise effectively in character. Nine interviews were evaluated as average, seven as above average, and five as below average.

Student B had some trouble understanding the spoken interview prompts, a challenge that can be difficult to strategize around. Much of his interview was spent on repetition and clarification of the task. He also had some trouble getting into

character, perhaps again a result of difficulty understanding what was being asked of him, and was unable to recall more than one or two of his lines from the scene. One line that he did recall readily, and with evident pleasure, was his own improvised line, “Hey! You forgot to pay!” Clearly, the experience of creating this line had left an impression on him.

In terms of thoughtful analysis, Student A gave the strongest responses in her group, perhaps because she was able to understand the prompts easily and had enough vocabulary and grammar to respond smoothly, though she tended not to recycle target expressions. Her facility with L2 was such that, when one of the interviewers used the wrong word while prompting her, Student A spontaneously asked whether the interviewer had meant to say “what” rather than “why.”

Student C, who had won the award for Best Individual Performance, was the most effective in the “in character” portion of the interview, adopting the hunched posture and hesitant speaking mannerisms that she had developed for her performance, and quickly recalling her lines. When asked what “animal image” she had chosen to represent her character during one of the sessions, Student C replied, “a mouse.” In contrast, Student A could not recall what animal image she had chosen. This suggests, perhaps, that while Student A felt comfortable relying on her L2 abilities throughout the project, and consequently may not have invested herself too deeply in the session tasks and activities, Student C had chosen to focus closely on the activities and was able to make more of her experience.

### **Survey outcomes**

On the post-Olympics survey, 100% of the students agreed, and 67% (14 of 21) agreed strongly, that their English pronunciation had improved through the drama performance project. Similarly, 100% agreed, and 57% (12 of 21) agreed strongly, that they had learned a variety of new words through the project. These perceived linguistic outcomes were unexpected, since improvement of pronunciation and acquisition of vocabulary were not explicit project objectives from the students’ perspective. For them, what had been emphasized was their objective as actors, that is, to communicate the story and the characters’ feelings to the audience.

With regard to emerging autonomy, most significant were the students’ responses to prompts addressing initiative and confidence. Prior to the Olympics, just 55% (11 of 20) believed that rehearsing and performing a dramatic scene in English would help them become more proactive in their self-expression. At the end of the project, 95% agreed, and 76% (16 of 21) agreed strongly, that the project had promoted active expression of their thoughts and feelings. The students themselves thus recognized their greater willingness to express themselves more autonomously. An important factor in autonomy is having enough confidence to take the initiative; 100% of the students agreed that the drama project had made them more confident in their own ability to speak English, with 71% (15 of 21) agreeing strongly.

## **5. Conclusion**

Components of Engeström’s Activity Theory model (Engeström, 1987) illustrate why outcomes of the 2009 English Olympics were so positive. Rather than the traditional social objective motivating English education in Japanese secondary

school (passing university entrance exams), the objectives of the seminar were to: promote learner autonomy; aid students in the construction of their ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2009); and, through these processes, to advance their L2 proficiency. The preparation and performance of the dramatic scenes involved meaningful social practice. With the mediating instruments (cultural and linguistic knowledge, the scenes themselves, the Reflection Sheets, and assessments) and subjects (the students and instructors) identified, it was possible to clarify the community (the “worlds” introduced in each scene), students’ roles within the community (as both group members and characters in a scene), and the rules to be followed by community members (norms for team-building and successful communication).

Following the success of the 2009 English Olympics, the planning team has decided to refine its drama project as a model for future Olympics. With regard to promoting student autonomy, the team will focus on whether: facilitator intervention has an impact on a scene group’s autonomy, motivation, and outcomes; learners should be explicitly invited to reflect on their own autonomy; experiencing learner autonomy affects student attitudes toward traditional English classes; and it is possible to collect and isolate data on autonomy from data on motivation, creativity, and L2 proficiency.

This drama project provided an engaging, meaningful experience, featuring concrete communication goals and integrated, carefully sequenced tasks in which students clearly perceived both their roles and the significance of the activity. With this experience behind them, the instructor team is better equipped to plan future English Olympics with an eye to nurturing the learner autonomy lacking in so many Japanese secondary students’ experiences of English education.

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## Tools to Enhance Second Language Writing Autonomy: Can we do things better?

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### Abstract

From setting goals and objectives to finding learning resources to assessing outcomes of learning activities (Candy, 1988), autonomy is known to trigger actions and agency in the learning process. Exercising personal influence on one's modus operandi and environment, implementing personal and deliberate power of action over the learning process stimulate and generate more energized higher cognitive processors. While becoming more competent in those processes, a writer or student-writer becomes more alert, more skilled to appraise writing needs, assess writing context, set communicative goals, and translate all of the above in a clear and unambiguous written message. Progressively, an independent or autonomous student-writer gains efficiency and organizational skills, becoming more agentic at taking responsibility to become a competent (independent) writer. This paper reports on research in which metacognition knowledge was provided by way of reading a scientific paper on L2 writing processes and products; and awareness of agency and autonomy was exposed by way of keeping a writing journal to consign thoughts and ideas about writing (before, during and after pedagogical interventions). Overall, the two led to better agentic actions and improved performance. Autonomy as awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence (Nunan, 1997) seems to respond to stimulation of consciousness.

**Key words:** second language writing, tertiary students, metacognition, autonomy, agency, reflexive writing tools, critical journal, questionnaires, Canada

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### 1. Introduction

Gadamer (2001) said that education was self-education. In a classroom where teachers are generally "in charge" of the program, this focus on self-education involves, as noted by Cotterall (2000), a transfer of responsibilities from teacher to learner. This capacity to take responsibility for one's language learning process makes sense when learning another language since the learning objective is to become completely proficient in the other language, a competence of the sole speaker/writer of the new language. This is not to say that the language learning process is carried out without pedagogical and didactic support, although there are cases of full self

language instruction. It simply means that “self-education” eventually takes over: with a capacity for critical reflection and awareness, choices are self-weighed, decisions are self-made, pragmatic control is taken on as learners self-educate themselves to communicate in the other language. Central to the notion of taking charge is the notion of “agency” which Ricoeur (in Bandura, 2007) defines as “*puissance personnelle d’agir*” (personal power to act). According to Hacker, Keener & Kircher (2009), agency requires, at a minimum, to be aware of one’s learning, from evaluating learning needs to generating and implementing them accordingly. Agency therefore relates to any action or decision made voluntarily to address the learning situation, hopefully in utmost awareness. The construct of this self-capacity is challenging and there is a widespread agreement that learners should be trained for it, concurrently with being taught the language. This paper reflects on some theoretical considerations about self-education, agency and autonomy in conjunction with writing in a second language (L2). It also introduces our way to address the training of autonomy, namely a trio of tools specifically put together with autonomy and efficient agency in mind applied to improving L2 writing. Finally, we offer enlightening comments from our students-writers who reported an increase in their awareness of their power over the writing process and the written products after using the tools. In a way, they felt more in charge of their L2 writing skills.

## 2. Context

There is more than one context to highlight in the research project reported here. We will focus on four: L2 writing in Canada; metacognition; journals as exercising grounds for metacognition; and autonomy.

### 2.1 Second language writing in Canada

Writing is a task, described by Levy & Olive as “one of the most complex activities that people can accomplish” (2001, p. 2); it entails tremendous cognitive operations. Many of them are constraints on working memory such as, on the larger scale, voice, genre, structure, paragraph and sentences; and, on the narrower scale but no less challenging, lexicon, grammar and mechanics. The process of writing has been under scrutiny for some decades with all theoretical models being devised to understand and appreciate its complexity and its ensuing challenges (see Grabe, 2001; Matsuda, 2004 for overviews of principles, theories and models of writing, in general and L2). It is therefore understandable, according to Lavelle (2009), that such complexity takes a toll on university students who often lack a sense of self-efficacy as writers. This feeling of powerlessness is somewhat exacerbated by the fact that at university, writing is the medium of choice for assignments. Whether to remember facts presented in university courses, link concepts and theories, develop critical thinking or map a subject, writing is the vehicle of expression: university students have no choice but to be efficient writers.

For Canadian university students, the writing component is even more challenging since many enter higher education with bilingualism in mind (Canada is officially bilingual, English-French). For students who hope to redeem the fruit of their immersion education (often from Kindergarten to Grade 12) and one day assert this competence to future employers to secure a job in the Canadian public and private sector, mastering university writing includes mastering writing in their L2. For them, university is the last training stop before the “real world”. Stakes are high to become



efficient, reliable and autonomous L2 writers, but so is their motivation and determination. The question for university professionals is how to support such legitimate aspirations, what can university (i.e. teachers) do differently (than high school) to help and inspire achievement of efficient and reliable autonomy in L2 writing?

As university is the last educational stage for most students, it is the ideal context to foster autonomy. Teaching writing in L2 at university should therefore focus on asking students to face up to their responsibility as individuals in charge of this last leg of their education, and upcoming professional life. To take this next step in responsibility, students must be objectively informed about proficient and expert writing, the only way to attend to what is still to be mastered in order to attain autonomy and competence. Teaching L2 writing at university therefore involves, in addition to regular L2 teaching, exposing students to scientific knowledge dealing with L2 writing expertise. Once aware of facts about writing in L2, learners can target directly the desired writing competence. For example, students should be “reminded” about some characteristics of writing: a-synchronicity, materiality and permanence. Remembering these facts prompts the awareness process, which in turn promotes dynamic autonomy. Drawing attention to the above characteristics, providing extra rewriting time and making explicit contact with the material results in exercising control over the learning process by fostering extra effort and channelling more (and better) use of strategies to progress to the goal. This provides room for a pedagogical metacognitive autonomy component about how to reach the set goals. How does one become an expert writer? What is an expert writer? What did the expert do to get there? L2 university learners must be trained to ask these questions and find suitable answers. They can only attain their goals if they are properly informed and knowledgeable through input from objective data which stimulates the metacognitive processes connected to gaining full competence as an L2 writer.

## 2.2 Metacognition

The new input in L2 writing competence knowledge stimulates cognitive and metacognitive processes, which then become active components in any writing. Hacker et al. (2009) provided an interesting list of metacognitively linked actions exceptionally constructive for L2 writers: “accurately diagnosing any breakdown in meaning, reviewing what has been written, generating new ideas, re-writing to produce new text [...] in better conformance with the writer’s purposes” (p. 158). Gains can be substantial and appropriate for any self-educating L2 student-writer since exercising writing is exercising metacognition. The more students write under a metacognitive approach, the more they can: understand and practice making appropriate decisions; engage in focused writing actions; consult more; ask advice; check words and rules in grammars, dictionaries and the internet. Knowledge escorts agency to input more energy and more efforts in the learning process, with an added sense of leadership over self-learning. Some of the writing processes will eventually become “automatic” but not all. Defining writing goals, retrieving from long-term memory, accessing and choosing lexis, assessing proper strategy over the basic writing process of planning, translating and revising, are actions that will always call for “explicit monitoring and control [...] in the production of a meaningful text” (Hacker, et al., 2009, p. 158). For L2 student-writers, even if the above are embedded in L1 writing process, this capacity is altered when writing in L2, hence extra time is needed for writing.

Some of the extra time can be devoted to understanding the process of autonomous learning from developing awareness, considering and using strategies, getting more involved with choices and decisions, selecting fitting and agentic interventions, making astute connections between learning experiences and outcomes (Nunan, 1997). Because the very nature of writing makes it a “mode of learning, a discovery process” (Levy & Olive, 2001, p. 2) and because it is applied metacognition (Hacker, et al., 2009), we designed the training of the processes of writing and autonomy around an active writing component: critical journal keeping. Since writing serves as a locus for metacognitive competences in both areas they will be enhanced by any action to: channel awareness to writing processes; educate a “thinking and decision-making” mind; and strengthen metacognitive monitoring and control. Hence, we argue that recording thoughts in journals of critical thinking should guide writers to growth both as writers and as self-educators of writing, and eventually support their objectives of improved competence as autonomous and performing L2 writers.

### 2.3 Journals

As journals are the educational tool of choice to track agency in L2 writing, they become our main source of metacognitive data allowing learners to zero in on *traces* of agentic decisions and strategies. Journals are flexible and tolerant to ambiguity and can expose the process and the progression of knowledge. They provide “authentic evaluation”, described as thoughtful, reflective, considered and specific to circumstances (Fenwick & Parsons, 2009). For example, comments gathered in journals after re-readings show how a learner used this circumstantial opportunity to find recurrent themes, explore possibilities, take stock or experiment with lucidity while exercising metacognitive mediation and control to meet the learning objectives. Interestingly, we could see here a form of “cognitive persuasive exercise” of the “What is best?” type of active awareness. As a form of persuasion, journal-keeping in parallel to re-reading often guides writers to re-examine existing evaluations about their production, and revise or change them (Wenden in Thanasoulas, 2000). As consciousness stimulators, logs allow knowledge to inform a writer’s decision-making process hence leading to a better sense and capability to recognize true and useful facts; and better sort them into meaningful and agentic components to improve L2 writing. Students who use more metacognition are better learners (Winne & Hadwin in Winne & Nesbit, 2009), and journal keeping facilitates learning, empowers learners with skilled self-authority to learn and offer us a reliable way for the assessment for autonomy, agency, metacognition in relation to L2 writing as opposed to an assessment of autonomy (O’Leary, 2007).

### 2.4 Learner autonomy

One does not become autonomous in some kind of sudden qualitative leap: rather autonomy comes as a spiral process with setbacks, progress, periods of latency and slow progression (Portine, 1998) for which Nunan (1997) suggests the sequence: awareness, involvement, action, creation, and transcendence, to which Benson adds “the process is highly uneven and variable” (Benson, 2001, p. 53). Moreover, efficient autonomy goes through what Portine calls a “*dynamysation*” of the cognitive functioning, which is acquired by:

carrying out actions and tasks as loci of intellectual operations development, growth and integration of knowledge [... which leads] to acquisition [...] in turn improved when one is able to understand the

task at hand, as well as challenges and obstacles to overcome. (Portine, 1998, p. 77)

The process of becoming autonomous is complex, as Oxford emphasized when quoting Freire “agency is not a gift that can be delivered to the learner” (Freire 1972, in Oxford, 2003, p. 81). That merely changing the learning situation cannot in itself create agency. Rather, agency involves exercising, practicing oneself to make conscious choices of action, training to bring freedom into play while confronting writing processes and products. The best arena for training agency in relation to L2 writing is critical thinking journals.

### 3. Research Goals, Participants and Tools

The purpose of the research reported here is to test the hypothesis that using tools specifically targeting the development of awareness leads to more efficient and empowered L2 writing agency. More particularly the research focuses on the perceptions of learners when using these tools. Do they feel more conscious and does it sparks off their agency? Do they consider they have become better assessors and implementers of change following information gathered from those tools? Do they observe that this extra awareness translates in better choices and decisions? Has their self-confidence as writer increased? What about their processing capacities as writers?

This paper concentrates on students’ perceptions of the following trio of tools:

1. A tool to give direct access (article to read) to scientific data on the processes of writing in L2 and characteristics of products derived from L2 writing
2. A double-headed tool to self-appraise one’s L2 writing process and characteristics of L2 written products with:
  - a) the “Personal Assessment Grid” (PAG)
  - b) the “Writer Sheet” (WS)
3. A tool to monitor and control metacognitive operations via a continuous “discussion” or written comments in a journal prompted by the use of the PAG and the WS

The writers-participants were enrolled in three FSL writing courses during Fall and Winter of 2008-2009:

Group I (second-year university course): 9 students (from a class of 24)

Group II (third year advanced writing course): 10 students (from a class of 19)

Group III (third year advanced writing course): 19 students (from a class of 33)

This paper focuses on the most striking observations from the above 38 students’ observations on their writing process as a way of guiding our current and future research.

### 4. Findings

It is clear that understanding autonomy means understanding the self as agent. In our case, the agency of an L2 writer is located in any self-activated actions in relation to writing, from the beginning of a writing project to its final product. Such understanding involves two types of agency knowledge. The first is linked to

participants' awareness and knowledge about their general and L2 writer's identities. Our project focused more on L2 identity and triggered the consciousness raising process by asking participants to complete two questionnaires about: apprehension of writing and anxiety when writing in the L2. Although we do not intend to discuss this component in the present paper, we can attest to the benefits of having chosen these questionnaires as starting points for and of consciousness; this "identity phase" immediately activated some L2 writer's metacognitive monitoring of themselves as writers. Completing the questionnaires created a distance between themselves as L2 writers and the writing task. It allowed for objective deliberation about the who, the why and the how of their actions, decisions and goals, when writing in their L2. Therefore, an "identity component of agency" will be part of any of our future projects on metacognition and L2 student-writers. Here, we wish to introduce and discuss the second aspect of agency knowledge, specifically directed to L2 writing actions and decisions. Two tools (Stimulus A and Stimulus B) were specifically designed to prop up consciousness and alertness of actions for L2 writers.

#### 4.1 Stimulus A (SA)

As our major metacognitive awareness stimulus, SA aims at providing objective knowledge on and about writing in L2 and L2 writers. Because writing is a personal activity, L2 writers often feel alone with the difficulties and challenges of L2 writing. Therefore, an opportunity to review the characteristics of text and writing processes in L2 provides a welcome distance to objectively address a very personal condition. L2 writers do know they are alone with their mistakes, but knowing this objectively frees them from their own L2 writing guilty tight spot. This objective knowledge stimulus consists of Chapter 6 of the book *Le point sur...La production écrite en didactique des langues* (Focus on writing in language teaching), by Claudette Cornaire and Patricia Raymond (1994) chosen for its clarity and user-friendliness. Reading this text induced the knowledge awareness process as demonstrated in the following two comments:

The three main skills and strategies recommended in this text are: the adjustment of the text according to prospective readers, a planning phase at all levels and constant review. Although the first two recommendations are relevant and essential to the drafting of better-quality texts in any language, I consider the third advice to be of major interest for me. This text guides us to evaluate and categorize our mistakes during our constant revision and by doing so, improve the revision process altogether [...] By following the advices in this document with regards to the revision of my work, I hope to be able to write texts in French much faster and with fewer errors. Thanks to this reading, I got to understand some specific features of writing in French that I need to upgrade. (Kathy, W09)

Of all the texts read in this course, this is the text has impressed me the most, the one that generated the deepest thoughts. Chapter 6 had reported that there is a list of common weaknesses in L2 writing. The opportunity to read this text was the first step to understand the weaknesses in my writing and those mistakes I often make. To see these characteristics logically presented and simply organized prompted the process to reflect on my writing. (Samantha, F08)

For some, reading this article was a shock:

When reading the text “Second Language Writing” for the first time, I thought I was a little like that. But after a second reading, it's scary how this text explains how I write in L2! A shorter text, more errors, a longer time of writing ... It's me! It is so totally me!!! (Heather, W09)

Students can no longer hide their heads in the sand this exposure. The door is wide opened to objective facts, and students are ready to embark on a conscious and agentic journey to improve their writing processes and writing products. At this point Stimulus B (SB) is used.

#### 4.2 Stimulus B (SB)

The second awareness stimulus, SB, follows from the Cornaire and Raymond's Chapter 6. It consists of a schematic outline of key facts from Chapter 6 presented as the PAG (see Appendix 1 for details of the Personal Assessment Grid). It contains a list of characteristics of written texts and writing processes; and facts on the development of writing at the sentence level. Each item is formulated as a statement stressing “negative” features or problems faced by L2 writers. This “negative form” is familiar to students because it replicates the type of comments they and their teacher use to describe problems. Students respond to each statement using a six point Likert scale. The PAG is completed after reading Chapter 6 and submitted to the researcher-teacher.

An individual evaluation of each PAG was conducted using the Writer's Sheet (WS), a tool comprised of adapted statements specifically targeting “wanted” writing features of good L2 writing processes and texts. The WS was designed to offer targeted individual appraisal using calibrated statements. For example: students who acknowledge in their self-assessment on the PAG “Vocabulary is limited” draw attention to a vocabulary weakness. In the WS, this negative evaluation is “changed” into a more active and positive sentence: “Do not forget to seek and use a more diverse vocabulary”. Hence, every negative characteristic was turned into an item to focus on, a feature to take into consideration in future tasks. The transition from a negative to an active tone brought “relief” to the “guilty” writer, suggesting instead an efficient and autonomous course of action.

Consider the following comment from a student whose WS suggested paying attention to the following: 1) more information, 2) more varied vocabulary, 3) more complex syntax, 4) more conjunctions, 5) more discourse connectors 6) more flexibility in the outline, 7) a focus directed more on ideas than grammar; 8) lengthened sentences:

I found it useful to check this list several times during the writing process. I looked before writing, and because of that, I tried to follow the recommended tips for my writing and was more flexible with my outline. In addition, I took some time to focus on ideas before grammar. I consulted it again before starting to review so things I needed to improve were fresh in my mind. I think I made the most changes during the review process. I rewrote many sentences in order to lengthen them, used a more complex syntax and conjunctions. I revised the text again to check words in my thesaurus and to add discourse connectors. Using this list helped me a lot during the writing process. (Louise, W09)

John's (W09) WS recommended closer attention to the following: 1) eliminate "*il y a*"; 2) focus on the character of the text; 3) never forget the reader; 4) no obsessive spelling and grammar checking. Ideas, reader, text structure are priority; 5) dictionary and grammar check should follow writing of whole sections. His comment illustrated confident and informed decision-making agency following the WS:

I decided to forget the grammar until the end of writing, but I cannot forget the spelling when I write because I believe that words are only words with spelling. If you do not think about spelling, you may end up writing other words that do not exist. And I think about the reader too, when I try to use a more explicit and "rich" vocabulary. Finally, idioms like "*il y a*" (there is) are completely eliminated, and I started using other constructions like "*il existe*". In fact, I think this construction is more elegant. This progress guide helped me a lot in this assignment.

Observations displaying self-confidence and improved awareness directly connected with the WS were abundant in critical journals. Here are a few:

I used my WS for the "*commentaire composé*"! I now have proof that it works! It drew my attention to aspects of language where I needed improvement and focus. Therefore, I could diversify the syntax and pull myself out of the "subject-verb-object-no-more structure! (Carmen, W09)

It is the first time I sketch a WS by myself. I can truly declare that the use of this tool has greatly exceeded my expectations. It was very beneficial for the final product of this essay. It helped me recognize, in a strategic and organized way, sections I had to review and why I had to do so. For instance, links between my sentences [...]. I realized the usefulness of this improvement grid and I can conclude that the latter will be in my future projects. (Catherine, W09)

In this essay, I worked hard on what I noted as my major problem areas in writing in French. My essay is much longer and for the first time, I met the requested word count! I totally avoided the construction "*il y a*". My syntax is more complex than in other assignments. I did my best not to translate my thoughts from English to French and really articulated my thoughts in French. Instead of stopping frequently to check the dictionary, I wrote in paragraphs, then checked those in need before moving on to the next paragraph. (Victoria, W09)

Some drew a parallel between recommendations from the WS and their progress during a specific task. At the hint of lengthening an assignment, a writer stated that his production was longer than previous ones; at the suggestion to develop vocabulary and work with the thesaurus, another declared having made an effort to find synonyms, feeling "happy and proud" to have "discovered" a more accurate word, "*merci au dictionnaire*". The following last comment on the timely impact of WS illustrates a deepened quality of self-confident metacognition and informed autonomy about the process:

I worked hard on the statements (from WS) that described my writing or my writing process in French, which were: my texts have less content; the same words are used throughout the text; the syntax is less complex; constructions are rather impersonal like the "*il y a*"; unnecessary and too frequent stops to check words or rules; and finally, difficulties of translate my thoughts from

English to French. In my opinion, I was able to overcome all these problems in this project. I took enough time to write my essay paragraph by paragraph, [...] I have perfected each paragraph before proceeding to the next. This approach has worked perfectly for me. I took things slowly and easily, and because I had enough time, I was not under any pressure to rush me. I took my time for once, [...] I “programmed” my head in French, which I must admit, was not as difficult as I thought. Just to think in French has made a huge difference, because then I did not even have to continue using the phrase “il y a” or the same words throughout the text. I'm incredibly happy to have taken my work more seriously. This proves how much better I can do if I only take the time to be more serious with my writing. The WS gave me the necessary courage and motivation to finish my "*minor*" in French, when at some point, I had doubt about it. (Mary, W09)

Self-completion of the WS was also possible, a task considered by many participants to be one of the most significant ever as learners. Prompting a key metacognitive thinking process, this generated an “urge” (their word) to understand the origin of their problems. In addition, turning the “negative” assessment questionnaire (PAG) into a positive WS offered a more neutral checklist. “The problematic aspects of my writing process became apparent” said Kathryn (F08). The positive comments were perceived as encouragement and, as she added, “I immediately wanted to change how I wrote.”

## 5. Reflections and Conclusion

From the journals, it is obvious the PAG is perceived as an actively nurturing tool for students' L2 writing. More interesting however is the fact that their comments are not solely based on beliefs but on newly acquired knowledge about the process and products of L2 writing. The subsequent decisions they recorded addressed a wider scope of characteristics without the usual “crushing L2 writing misery” feeling. Because observations, choices and decisions stemmed from themselves as educated learners, they became self-initiators of the first list from PAG and the subsequent positive WS list. They got to manufacture their personal “aide- mémoire” of items on which to focus. The tools became a self-generated precautionary device for inattention they had identified as one of their behaviours, an “inside self-instructor” doing advance marking before the reader. It seems that autonomous attention to process and production generated a more active convergence of strategies to improve writing. More beneficial account taking of the elements involved, more efficient built-up of autonomy and more metacognitive monitoring prompted more fruitful decisions and actions regarding corrective strategies. This could be the emergence of psychological autonomy where, according to Oxford (2003), an independent learner of L2 shows performance of high motivation, self-efficacy, and displays a faith in his or her abilities to organize and execute the necessary actions to achieve a goal.

This is where we can do things better, where lies the pedagogical support to be put in place.

We know there is no writing without thinking about writing. But for learners of writing (in any educative setting), there is a need to unwrap the thinking process, ensure products of reflection are available to observation. Just like turning on the light in a dark corridor, providing metacognitive knowledge and enforcing journal

keeping light up the corridors of the mind. Metacognitive material feeds journal writing, which then exposes students to the action of taking responsibility for their skills to implement, using their improved knowledge of and for their goals. Journals provide evidence about choices and decisions by bringing them to consciousness. They afford evidence of informed freedom in participants; writings. All participants, with varying degrees of intensity, came to display autonomy, that is to say more attention, more metacognitive knowledge and more critical thinking (Lai, 2001; O'Leary, 2007). All admitted to challenges, extra time and commitment of effort. Most acknowledged the many steps between initial alertness and evidence of progress. But somewhere the ingenuousness of ignorance was defeated, a way was opened to agentic, dynamic and autonomous efforts, as is emphasised in this final participant comment:

My biggest problem is that [...] I want to have a little angel on my shoulder to bother me to use my dictionary, my Bescherelles... In fact, such a little angel does not exist. It is for me to take charge and to encourage myself. And this I do a lot more now! (Kerrie, F08)

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## Appendix 1: Personal Assessment Grid: Guide to writing progress ©cdion (Following Cornaire & Raymond, 1994)

Scale: 5 = That's totally me!; 4 = I recognize myself very well; 3 = I recognized myself quite well; 2 = I recognized myself a little; 1 = I don't really recognized myself much; 0 = I don't recognize myself at all.

### A) Characteristics of texts written in a second language (L2)

Texts are shorter	0 1 2 3 4 5
Less information	0 1 2 3 4 5
Less content	0 1 2 3 4 5
Vocabulary is limited	0 1 2 3 4 5
The same words are used throughout the text	0 1 2 3 4 5
Syntax is simple	0 1 2 3 4 5
Syntax is less complex than in L1	0 1 2 3 4 5
Sentences with subordination, less embeddings	0 1 2 3 4 5
Information units have 12,6 words (22 in L1)	0 1 2 3 4 5
Impersonal constructions are mostly of the "il y a" type	0 1 2 3 4 5
Less clauses or sentences engaging the reader (question, exclamation), inability to draw attention on important aspects.	0 1 2 3 4 5
A sheltered syntax, no risk taking	0 1 2 3 4 5
More mistakes and errors:	
Errors in the text structure	0 1 2 3 4 5
Errors in syntax	0 1 2 3 4 5
Errors in discourse connectors	0 1 2 3 4 5

### B) Writing process in Second Language

Extended length of time for redaction	0 1 2 3 4 5
Frequent stops to check in reference dictionaries, check for rules	0 1 2 3 4 5
Tendency to speak out loud when writing	0 1 2 3 4 5
Difficulties to translate one's thoughts from L1 to LS	0 1 2 3 4 5
Limited repertoire of strategies or use of inadequate ones	
The writer does not question him/herself about who the reader will be, mostly write for themselves (internal narrative egocentric monologue)	0 1 2 3 4 5
Ideas rapidly thrown on paper	0 1 2 3 4 5
Linked to two or three information pieces found in memory and gathered hastily in some form of outline	0 1 2 3 4 5
Quite rigid outline, will most likely never be modified	0 1 2 3 4 5
Texts are missing information, usually too short	0 1 2 3 4 5
Ideas are put side by side	0 1 2 3 4 5
Main concern is on orthography and grammar of the clause	0 1 2 3 4 5
Disappearance of the global meaning of the text	0 1 2 3 4 5
Limited linguistic know-how	0 1 2 3 4 5
Simple structure (SVO), short most of the time	0 1 2 3 4 5
Data showing writing strategies (planning and revision; useful outline writing; overall handling and use of the global structure of a text, etc.)	0 1 2 3 4 5

## **Portfolio Assessment: A tool for self-directed learning at post-secondary level**

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### **Abstract**

The majority of recent studies about portfolio assessment have advocated a substantial change to the stressful test-based traditional system of assessment for EFL students. The present study investigated portfolios as a means of self-assessment that helped students at the School of Applied Science and Technology (SAST) with their self-directed learning. Thirty-four female students majoring in Graphics and attending a course of General English participated in this research. This triangulated qualitative study was based on the learners' reflective essays, group and individual interviews, and colleague observation. Results confirmed that using a self-directed rather than traditional system and catering for stress free assessment and self-assessment with portfolios improves EAP learners' language learning.

**Key words:** portfolio assessment, self-directed learning, EAP, Iranian tertiary students

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### **1. Introduction**

Teaching is a core activity at universities. In our educational systems for measuring learner's ability and performance, teachers provide a single examination at the end of the course. Whatever grade learners get on the final exam will determine whether they are qualified to pass the course or not. We cannot obtain the true score of learners just with a single examination. Bachman (1990) says "if we could obtain measures for an individual under all the different conditions specified in the universe of possible measures, his average score on these measures might be considered the best indicator of his ability" (p. 191). In Iran most teachers use a traditional model for Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language at universities. This traditional model and teacher-centred approach to evaluation imposes a tense situation overwhelmed with stress and competition for the students which leaves learners stricken with much anxiety about their evaluation or examination scores. The above

scenario may sound very familiar to many teachers and students. Yet, it is not clear whether schools and universities which have the potential to be sites for fundamental changes are doing their jobs accordingly. In order to decrease the learners' stress about marks and increase learners' participation and cooperation in the class, a portfolio shows that it can be rather effective for measuring learners' progress by a form of both formative and summative assessment.

A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's effort, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection. (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991, p. 60)

Whether a portfolio is self-initiated or required by the school or another organization, self-evaluation is key to ownership of learning and the continuous improvement of professional practice. In particular, positive self-evaluation can encourage the setting of higher goals and the continued devotion of personal effort toward achieving those goals. The practice of self-evaluation can increase professional self-confidence over time (Rolheiser, 1996). The study described here investigated portfolio assessment and its role in effective learning.

## 2. The Problem

Many teachers in Iran nowadays try to assess their students' language ability through a one-shot exam conducted at the end of each semester. This kind of assessment has two problems:

1. It is not reliable.  
Using a single examination at the end of term cannot show the students' true ability. Human beings change in every situation, therefore teachers can never view their students' actual competence and cannot have access to their students' strengths and weaknesses with one single final exam.
2. It encourages memorization and rote learning.  
Thus it does not result in meaningful learning because when students know that the final exam is very important for their assessment they try to memorize the books but after the exam they forget them. This means that teachers with such methods of assessing cannot lead their students toward meaningful learning.

Therefore an alternative method of assessment that involves the teaching-learning process, supportive feedback, fostering meaningful learning, and students' own participation is needed. Portfolio assessment, according to many educators (cf. Bachman, 1990; Gipps, 1994; Lefrancois, 1997; Rolheiser, 1996), can be acceptable as an alternative to the traditional method of assessment. Burke, Fogarty & Belgard (1994) believe that portfolios are actually composed of two major components, the *process* and the *product*. With the realization that portfolios provide authentic evidence of what students know, believe, and are able to do they have become a desired tool for evaluating language learning (Ozturk & Cecen, 2007). Jones and Shelton (2006) assert that there is a strong link between portfolios and the constructivist view as a teaching/learning orientation and human development. In fact, this method can help the students to develop the capability of self-monitoring, self-assessing and self-correction. Furthermore the positive, cooperative, stress-free atmosphere of

portfolio classes will enhance the students' performance and improve their learning and scores.

The purpose of this study was to assess the role of portfolio assessment in the effective learning of English language ability of Applied Science and Technology School learners' in a General English course. According to Rolheiser, Bower and & Stevahn (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000) a "Portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits students' efforts, and reflection, also a comprehensive record of growth and development, additionally a process that involves learners at every stage" (p. 106). Moreover, Song and August (2002) discovered that portfolio assessment is as valid as any standardized test in predicting the students' success in an English course. Additionally, the flexibility of portfolios makes them ideal tools for encouraging learner autonomy (Banfi, 2003). The specific research question this study set out to answer was:

*Does portfolio assessment as an alternative approach to evaluation help students at the School of Applied Science and Technology with improving their general English?*

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants were 34 female students, between eighteen and twenty-five years old, of the School of Applied Science and Technology (ASTA). They were majoring in Graphics and they were taking a General English course which consisted of four-hour sessions once per week for ten weeks.

#### 3.2. Instruments

The data for the study was collected by analysing essays written by the students, interviews with some of the students and observations conducted by an independent observer. These instruments were designed and used in a way consistent with the work of Denzin (1970); Merriam (1988); Patton (1990); and Stake (1995).

#### **Reflective essay**

Students wrote reflective essays about discussions in previous class sessions and their own opinion and understanding in each session. Reflective essays helped obtain students' level of understanding of general knowledge. Additionally, students had to reflect on their learning at the end of the term and tried to assess themselves with one reflective essay. Dewey (1938) asserts that we do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting experiences. Like Dewey, Rolheiser et al (2000) proposes that students produce work to show that they have gained from involvement in learning experience. Reflection is an effective tool for assessment and instruction. Reflection happens when students think about how their work meets established criteria; they analyse the effectiveness of their efforts, and plan for improvement. Reflecting on what has been learned and articulating that learning to others is the heart and soul of the portfolio process. Without reflection, a portfolio has little meaning. Essentially, reflection is linked to elements that are fundamental to meaningful learning and cognitive development. These elements are:

1. The development of metacognition, i.e. the capacity for students to improve their ability to think about their thinking.
2. The ability to self-evaluate, i.e. the capacity for students to judge the quality of their work based on evidence and explicit criteria for the purpose of doing better work.
3. The development of critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making, i.e. the capacity for students to engage in higher-level thinking skills.
4. The enhancement of teacher understanding of the learner, i.e. the capacity for teachers to know and understand more about the students with whom they work.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted at the end of term and included 10 open-ended questions about learners' feelings when they were learning English at the first session and at the end of term; also what they thought about the amount of their language learning, plus, what they thought about the portfolio and its role in their learning. Both group and individual interviews were conducted. Four learners were invited to individual interviews and other learners took part in group interviews. Because of time limitations, the researchers tried to make a friendly situation in the class for doing group interviews.

### **Observation**

A colleague of the researchers who was an experienced English teacher observed the classes for two sessions.

### **3.3. Procedure**

At the beginning of a term in the School of Applied Science and Technology, one class of 34 EAP learners were chosen as participants for this study. The materials used in class were the concept and comment book and some interesting reading materials that students got from various sources including story books, media, and the internet and brought into the class. Also they gave lectures discussed reading materials and expressed opinions. The teacher taught General English and incorporated portfolio assessment. Students wrote reflective essays during the term for each session. They wrote one additional reflective essay about how much and what they had learnt at the end of the term. Each reflective essay was evaluated by two raters in order to increase the reliability of the assessment. The criteria for evaluation of reflective essays were in three levels of performance recorded as the letter grades: A (proficient performance), B (adequate performance), and C (limited performance). Papers that were well organized, communicated the ideas clearly and showed real understanding were awarded an A grade. Papers that were somewhat organized, communicated some ideas clearly and showed some understanding were awarded a B grade. Papers that were disorganized, communicated no ideas clearly and showed little understanding received a C grade. At the end of the course, an interview based on portfolio assessment activity was conducted to investigate the degree of EAP learning in this course.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Based on an analysis of the reflective essays, including those written specifically about self-assessment and class assessment, and on the individual interviews, the following twelve recurring themes were found related to class assessment and self-

assessment. In this section abbreviated pseudonyms have been used to represent the participants.

#### 4.1 Self-directed learning

Knowles proposed that self-directed learning has been described as a:

..process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others. To diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies and evaluate learning outcomes. (Knowles, 1975, p. 18)

On the other hand Rolheiser et al (2000) believes that the reasons for using portfolios include: encourage self-directed learning, enlarge the view of what is learned, foster learning about learning, demonstrate progress toward goals, provide a window into students' heads and hearts, intersect instruction and assessment, provide a vehicle for students to value themselves as learners and offer opportunities for peer-supported growth. Yang (2003) believes that portfolios have the capability to raise students' awareness and self-directed learning along with facilitating learning process. All these sentiments can be seen reflected in students' comments (Table 1).

**Table 1: Comments Made About Self-directed Learning**

	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Source</b>
1	Giving lecture, discussion, writing reflective essay help my improvement and I learn how I can better learn. (M.Z.)	Reflective Essay
2	I want to say thank to our teacher who learn us being human and learn how to communicate with other people and how to learn new thing and improve our life and knowledge. (SH.Y.)	Reflective Essay
3	Not only we advance in listening, reading, speaking and writing but also we get self-directed learning that help us for our life and language learning. (S.A.)	Reflective Essay
6	Not only we learn all skills in our English class with portfolio assessment but also we learn how to guide ourselves in our life. (T.J)	Interview
7	We learn how to learn it makes us independent. At first we are dependent to our teacher but now we know how to learn language. (M.S.SH.)	Interview

#### 4.2 Improvement of self-confidence

Almost all students agreed that writing reflective essays has increased the characteristic of their self-confidence (Table 2). Portfolios have proved effective in upgrading learners' authority, positive attitudes and responsibility towards learning (Yang, 2003). One positive change which took place in students according to their reflective essays was related to self-confidence. Making students responsible for presenting a lecture individually or with a group, helping them to start discussions in the class, encouraging them to express their opinion freely without any fear of punishment were the ways in which teacher tried to raise students' self-confidence. According to Cranton (1994), when a person is interpreting the meaning of a new

experience and examining the validity of prior learning, discussion with others provides a vehicle for learning.

**Table 2: Comments Made About Improvement of Self-confidence**

	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Source</b>
1	My first session of English class was very difficult because I don't have self-confidence but now I have self confidence in my class and speak without stress although my speaking isn't very good. (A.V.)	Reflective Essay
2	This way of learning helps me improve my confidence. Now I don't fear of speaking in public. (F.H.)	Reflective Essay
3	My confidence goes up from the beginning when I try to speak about what I learn. (N.B.)	Reflective Essay
4	This class raises our confidence. (Z.A.)	Reflective Essay
5	I think most of students have self confidence in language class because they think they can speak, write, read and listen. (M.S.SH)	Reflective Essay
6	Previously I think I cannot speak or write English but now I think I can and I try to do it more and more. (M.S.SH.)	Interview
7	This class increases my self-confidence. I studied translation for two term and I thought that English was the most difficult knowledge that I never learnt but in this class I understand that I can learn everything that I want and my self-confidence increase. (R.H.)	Interview
8	Thanks for my teacher because allow us to say or write everything that we think is correct and don't fear us for mistake and increase our self-confidence. (T.J)	Interview
9	It is interesting for me to speech always I have barrier in my mind and I think I can't speak but now I know that I can and it propose my self-confidence. (Z.A.)	Interview

### 4.3 Self-assessment

Self-assessment is included in authentic assessment because students are analysing what they have experienced and learned (Wiggins, 1989). Participant comments show that portfolios promoted student involvement in assessment, responsibility for self-assessment, interaction with teachers, parents, and students about learning, collaborative and sharing classrooms, students' ownership of their own work; students' ability to think critically and be excited about learning (Table 3) and this is in line with the findings of Genesee & Upshur (1996). Students clearly felt they were able to assess their improvement.

### 4.4 Stress-free classes

It is a goal of many teaching environments but particularly learner-centred ones, to provide a stress-free environment. It is clear from the many comments that students noticed and appreciated the reduced stress provided in this study (Table 4).



**Table 3: Comments Made About Self-assessment**

	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Source</b>
1	It was a chance for students to examine themselves and their progress. (M.Z.)	Reflective Essay
2	I think all of students can get good mark because they learn English well and deeply. (N.SH.)	Reflective Essay
3	My writing and speaking is made better from the beginning. Also I think all of students become better in English language skill. (P.R.)	Reflective Essay
4	I become active in language learning and I learn lot of new thing so; I feel happy now. (T.R.)	Reflective Essay
5	I move forward in English class this term. I learn English very good. (S.Y.S.)	Reflective Essay
6	we can assess ourselves how much we learn. (SH.R.)	Interview
7	I can write and speak about many topics now but I couldn't do in the past. I can sense my improvement. I feel happiness.	Interview
8	my first session and last session speaking and writing (S.H.M.) are very different from each other. The last one is better than first one. (T.J.)	Interview

**Table 4: Comments Made About Stress-free Classes**

	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Source</b>
1	I think portfolio writing assessment decrease students' stress because it is friendly system. (M.A.)	Reflective Essay
2	When the new term began I was embarrassed for going to class. When I got familiar with teacher method and portfolio assessment it was easier for me to come to class. (M.Z.)	Reflective Essay
3	Portfolio assessment decreases our stress for giving score in final. (F.H.)	Reflective Essay
4	It is very good method because marks distribute in our class work and portfolio and fear of examination reduced. (P.R.)	Reflective Essay
5	We have the least worry for our final mark. (F.M.M.)	Reflective Essay
6	Teacher divides the scores very good because of this fear diminished for test. (R.Y.)	Reflective Essay
7	It is a good way for decreasing our tension for final exam. (M.S.SH.)	Interview
8	Stress free class increases my self-confidence. We are very relaxed in class and without tension we say all things that we want. (Z.A.)	Interview
9	Sitting in round circle improve our face to face relationship this friendly situation decrease our stress. We have a stress free class. (T.J.)	Interview

#### 4.5 Teacher-student relationships

According to Valencia, McGinley, & Pearson (1990), the assessment process should include a time for students and teachers to collaborate about their work. Comments from participants in the study suggest this was happening (Table 5). During the course the teacher fosters an intimate link with students in order to not only talk *to* learners but talk *with* them (Freire, 2005). In other words, if teachers come down from their safe and impregnable position to a friendlier and open environment, they can find the opportunity to connect with the concrete conditions of the students' world which impact students' ways of thinking and living (Freire, 2005) and so succeed in talking *with* students. Moreover, it is through friendly interaction with students that teachers can encourage social and personal development in students and respect their whole person (Lefrancois, 1997).

**Table 5: Comments Made About Friendly Relationships Between Teachers and Students**

	Comment	Source
1	When I see teacher have friendly relationship with us and don't punish us for tiny mistake, I try to speak in the class. (A.V.)	Reflective Essay
2	Teacher has a good relationship with their students. (N.B.)	Reflective Essay
3	Teacher has very important role in my feeling. Her friendly relationship helps me learn more and more without any tension. (T.J.)	Reflective Essay
4	Teacher has a good manner and friendly relationship with us. If I have another chance of studying English in this university I will choose her as my English teacher. (L.N.)	Reflective Essay
5	I thank my dear teacher that provides a friendly class for us. (M.S.SH.)	Reflective Essay
6	The class has friendly situation we don't fear of ridicule in our class. (M.S.SH.)	Interview
7	Teacher has a friendly relationship with us and we dot fear of her. (Z.A.)	Interview
8	I love my teacher and classmates and my English class. This class makes our feel happy. (B.K.A)	Interview

#### 4.6 Non-comparative class environment

An important perception among students emerging from the data is that the teacher refrained from comparing students, looking instead at each individual's development in relation to their own starting point. Students liked this approach (Table 6).

#### 4.7 Development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills

Although the major goal of the coursebook was reading skills, the teacher covered all language skills during the term with group discussions, lectures and writing reflective essays. Almost all students referred to this point in their reflections (Table 7).

**Table 6: Comments Made About Lack of Comparison by the Teacher**

	Comment	Source
1	Teacher doesn't compare us with each other but she encourages us for every development. (T.J.)	Reflective Essay
2	Thanks for teacher because she assesses me based on my development and just compare me with mine. She never compares me with my classmates. (A.V.)	Reflective Essay
3	I am relaxed in English class because I try to promote my skill and my teacher just sees my development and encourages me for that. She doesn't compare students with each other. (L.N.)	Reflective Essay

**Table 7: Comments Made About Development of Language Skills**

	Comment	Source
1	Not only I think my listening, reading, writing and speaking improve but also my writing improvement is the most. (A.V.)	Reflective Essay
2	My writing, listening, reading, speaking skill and vocabulary knowledge improvement. I think my reading and writing skill more strength than the others. (F.H.)	Reflective Essay
3	Teacher doesn't create any barrier to our speaking. We can speak wrong or right. She just corrects us with a good manner. So, we try to speak and our speaking skill develops. We learn how can we write and many words therefore our vocabulary and writing skill develop. Also our listening and reading skill improve. (Z.A.)	Reflective Essay
4	Reflective essay help me not only in writing but also in speaking. (L.S.)	Reflective Essay
5	Portfolio assessment improve all four skill especially has great influence on our writing and understanding. (M.S.SH.)	Reflective Essay
6	This method is very helpful because I become progress in grammar, vocabulary, writing, speaking reading and listening. I use all skills altogether. (F.M.M.)	Reflective Essay
	In the previous we just learn grammar but in this class we learn all skills integrated and I think we focus on speaking writing and reading. (R.Y.)	Reflective Essay
	I think my speaking and writing more than listening and reading is improved although my all skills is developed. (M.S.SH.)	Interview
	(T.J.) Because we work all skills altogether so our whole skills improved. I think My writing improvement is more than other skills.	Interview
	When we want to write a reflective essay we should read the lesson carefully and when we want to speak or discuss in the class we should listen to our teacher or classmates so as we see all skills improve. (SH.R.)	Interview

#### 4.8 Depth of understanding

Students commented in both their own reflective essays and in interviews on the effect of reflection on producing deeper understanding in their learning (Table 8).

**Table 8: Comments Made About Deep Understanding**

	Comment	Source
1	I get most of the meaning of learning part and try to reach deep understanding. It means that I don't memorize. (N.B.)	Reflective Essay
2	When we want to write reflective essay about the lesson we should understand the meaning of it deeply. We can't suggest, reject and accept something with memorizing. Also we can't write a conclusion with memorizing. (Z.A.)	Reflective Essay
3	(T.J.) We force to think deeply on every subject when we want to write reflective essay.	Reflective Essay
4	I think this method is good, because students study every lesson in depth every week and they are not memorize it. (M.S.SH.)	Reflective Essay
5	In this way we study hard for better understanding of lessons and it makes better our readiness for final exam. (F.M.M.)	Reflective Essay
6	We have to write therefore we go to find new vocabularies and think about what we want to read. Deep understanding happened but in traditional method we just memorize something and then forget it. (M.S.SH.)	Interview
7	We learn better English with deep understanding in this course because we should think when we want to write reflective essay. (L.S.)	Interview

#### 4.9 The reflective essay as a vehicle for reviewing lessons

Portfolio assessments help students learn to learn. The students' comments illustrate they have understood this point (Table 9).

**Table 9: Comments Made About Reflective Essays for Reviewing Lessons**

	Comment	Source
1	The way that we wrote reflective essay was very good because it was a review of lesson and we freely say our opinion. (M.Z.)	Reflective Essay
2	(T.J.) For writing reflective essay, students should study more their English lesson so; they review every lesson more than one time.	Reflective Essay
3	This method is attractive and makes active participation of students in class and they review the materials when they want to write reflective essay. (P.R.)	Reflective Essay

#### 4.10 Learning English for learning not just getting a mark

One effect of working with portfolios can be that the focus moves away from examinations and squarely onto learning. A result when this happens can be that students learn because they see the purpose of learning and want to learn. In this study this impact was noted by a number of participants (Table 10).

**Table 10: Comments Made About Learning for Learning Not Just for Marks**

	Comment	Source
1	Students learn for learning and they don't have any stress about exam. It is good way because may be one of student's get sick on exam night or have problem and she don't study well. So, the score shows she is lazy but in this method we study during the term for learning with the least stress. (A.Z.)	Reflective Essay
2	I think this method (portfolio assessment) is good....we didn't have any concern about exam during the term so, we endeavoured always. We learnt one lesson entirely and then studied next one for learning not mark. (M.A.)	Reflective Essay
3	This method forces student to be active in class. (F.H.)	Reflective Essay
4	Portfolio assessment causes we study during the term and we don't study all lessons just for getting a mark in final exam. When we should study for getting a mark we try to memorize it at the exam night but in this method we study lesson during the term for learning. (M.S.SH.)	Reflective Essay
5	I learn for learning and getting a mark is not important because I know that I can get a good mark. (T.J.)	Interview
6	In this term I study English for learning not just for getting a mark. (Z.H.)	Interview

#### 4.11 Learner's interest in English

A further consequence of refocusing away from examinations and onto learning can be the development of an inherent interest in the target language. There was evidence of this in the current study (Table 11).

**Table 11: Comments Made About Interest in the Target Language**

	Comment	Source
1	Thank you so much because most of student interested in English. (M.Z.)	Reflective Essay
2	If we have to learn we can't understand anything. During this course I find that English language is sweet and every one can learn it. (Z.A.)	Reflective Essay
3	(N.SH.) I am happy because English class was very good and now I am interested to learn English.	Reflective Essay
4	Not only Teacher's good behaviour had a great role in our interested in English but also this stress free method help us to interest English. (M.S.SH.)	Reflective Essay
5	English language becomes loveable to me during this course. (S.H.M.)	Reflective Essay
6	Newly I like to learn English and I think it is interesting. (Z.A.)	Interview
7	I thank my teacher that she gets me interested in learning English. (M.S.SH.)	Interview
8	After I come to this class little by little I interested to learn English. In the past I always was afraid of language learning and I thought I was difficult to learn (B.K.A)	Interview

#### 4.12 Desire to continue language learning

Accompanying the developing inherent interest in the target language is a desire from some of the students to continue learning the language (Table 12).

**Table 12: Comments Made About Desire to Continue Language Learning**

	Comment	Source
1	I hope it would be a start for continuing language learning. (M.Z.)	Reflective Essay
2	I'm glad this class makes a starting point to me and I want to continue and improve my English as soon as possible. (M.S.SH.)	Reflective Essay
3	In near future I will study English and learn it, because now I am interested in language learning and want to keep on trying. (Z.H.)	Reflective Essay
4	I am sad because my English class is finished. I like to continue such as this term for learning English in future. It is a worth-while experiment. (S.Y.S.)	Reflective Essay
5	I don't like finishing this term because I think if this term continues I can improve more and more. (T.J.)	Interview
6	I want to continue my learning English if I can. (B.K.A)	Interview
7	I am sad because our English class is finished and I cannot go to the class. I like to learn more English and continue my learning. (N.SH.)	Interview

### 5. Observations

An independent colleague experienced with teaching the course but not associated with the research was asked to perform two roles: as observer of two lessons taught during the research and as an independent inter-rater to enhance validity of scoring. After performing as an observer the colleague recorded some comments (Table 13) and again after serving as inter-rater (Table 14). Both sets of comments suggest that the project has achieved its goals of providing a less stressful learning environment which encourages student reflection on learning. It is also notable that these observations overlap considerably with points raised by the student participants.

**Table 13: Comments made by the Independent Observer**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When I went to class the students were sitting in a circle, and the teacher was a part of that circle, which showed the cooperative nature of the class.</li> <li>• Students had to read the passage and also speak about it in English therefore two skills were worked at the same time. In addition, they had to listen to others for better understanding the text.</li> <li>• Error correction was not so harsh.</li> <li>• The teacher permits the students to give their comments and suggestions.</li> <li>• There was a peaceful atmosphere in class between the teacher and learners.</li> <li>• All four skills had to be worked on because of the nature of the subject.</li> <li>• By using portfolios or writing reflective essays some parts of the task were done and other parts were done by different techniques such as lecture, reading comprehension, free discussion.</li> <li>• The class was teacher-learner-centred. The teacher carefully paid attention to the learners' suggestions and needs.</li> <li>• Learners were satisfied with the improvement of their English language skills.</li> </ul>
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**Table 14: Comments Made by The Independent Inter-rater**

- Because of students' limitation of knowledge, we could not expect them to become an advanced writer during a general English course but their writing skill improved.
- More important was that many of students who had not dared to write in English, by use of the portfolio method were encouraged to write.
- Students were anxious at first but step-by-step they overcome their psychological and socio-communicative barriers.
- Most of students assessed themselves clearly also they assessed their teacher and the program.
- Learners understand their improvement and reflected their learning process in their essay.

## 6. Conclusion

The positive effects of portfolio assessment brought about in the students' self-directed learning such as personal, social and educational development are beyond doubt since, as observed in the reflective essays, interviews and observations there were considerable positive changes in students' self-confidence and self-assessment and development of all four language skills. The use of portfolios provided twelve benefits to the students that include: self-directed learning, improvement of self-confidence, development of self-assessment skills, a stress-free class, friendly relationship between the teacher and students, no comparative class situation, development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, deep understanding, the use of reflective essays as a vehicle for reviewing lessons, learning English for learning not just getting marks, developing interest in English and an enhanced desire to continuing language learning.

These are valuable things for the students because they help develop more responsible and independent learners. It is hoped that the lasting results of the present study will help every teacher, including the present researchers, to recognise the benefits of portfolio assessment in self-directed learning and use it in their class.

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# Verbalization Plus Automatization Plus Autonomy: A simple formula for learner autonomy

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## Abstract

To be an autonomous learner is to have the ability to make decisions for one's own learning. To have the ability to set goals, implement strategies to attain goals, identify relevant resources, and access personal progress is advantageous for learning and facilitates successful functioning in society. In order to effectively promote autonomy, a process of learning must first occur. This process has been defined by Ur's three-stage model of skill learning: verbalization, automatization and autonomy. Verbalization requires teachers to introduce new materials or skills that can be easily understood in the initial learning. Automatization engages learners in meaningful exercises or activities until they master them to the extent that they can perform them without thinking. In the autonomy stage learners can improve on their own through further meaningful practice. The goal of this paper is to see whether Ur's model of learning can be observed in the classroom. In addition, this paper answers two questions: What are the students' ratings of the verbalization, automatization and autonomy of English courses at three universities and what is the implication of the results for classroom teaching?

**Key words:** verbalization, automatization, autonomy, EFL, Japanese tertiary students

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## 1. Introduction

Holec (1981) defines autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. An autonomous learner is expected to set his/her learning goals, identify and develop learning strategies to achieve such goals, develop study plans, reflect on

learning, identify and select relevant resources and support, and assess his/her own progress. Furthermore, Cotterall (1995) cited three important reasons for developing learner autonomy: philosophical, pedagogical and practical. The philosophical reason involves the learners' right to make choices about their learning, which, according to Knowles (1975) is important in preparing learners for a rapidly changing future. The pedagogical reason argues that adults demonstrably learn more, and more effectively, when they are consulted about dimensions such as the pace, sequence, mode of instruction and even the content of what they are studying (Candy, 1988). The practical argument for promoting learner autonomy is that learners need to be able to learn on their own because they do not always have access to the kind or amount of instruction they need to become proficient.

Autonomy can be promoted in the classroom through presentation and practice following Ur's (2002) Verbalization-Automatization-Autonomy model. New materials or skills should first be presented to make them clear, comprehensible and available for learning. Then meaningful practice activities should be employed until the new material or skill is mastered, and learners begin to improve on their own, using the acquired material or skill by themselves with less or no teacher supervision. This three-stage process of skill learning, that is, presentation, practice and autonomy, is the focus of this study.

The goal of this paper is to determine whether Ur's (2002) V-A-A model was observed in the classrooms. Specifically it addresses the following questions:

1. *How do students rate the verbalization, automatization and autonomy of the English courses from their universities?*
2. *What are the implications of the results for classroom teaching?*

## 2. Ur's Model of Skill Learning

The process of learning a skill by means of a course of instruction has been defined as a three-stage process: verbalization, automatization and autonomy (Ur, 2002).

### 2.1 Verbalisation

Verbalization, also known as presentation, requires teachers to mediate new materials or skills to be learned so they appear in an accessible form and thus can easily be perceived and understood. The verbalization stage is necessary when learners have insufficient time for repeated and different exposures to raw, unmediated new input. Ur (2002) stresses that verbalization is important to activate learners' prior knowledge and harness learners' attention, effort, intelligence and conscious (metacognitive) learning strategies in order to enhance learning.

For *verbalization* to be effective teachers must focus on:

1. Attention: by providing interesting new materials or skills
2. Perception: by ensuring learners see or hear the new materials or skills clearly through repetitions or getting some kind of response
3. Understanding: by illustrating and making links with previously learned materials or skills
4. Retention: by placing new materials or skills in short-term memory and providing later opportunities to practice

Crucial for effective verbalization are the following six guidelines for giving explanations and instructions:

1. Explicit explanations and instructions must be given.
2. Ensure full attention.
3. Present explanations and instructions more than once.
4. Be brief but clear.
5. Illustrate with examples relating these as far as possible to the learners' own lives and experiences
6. Get feedback from the learners.

## 2.2. Automatization

Following verbalization, learners practice repetitively, usually in meaningful exercises or activities until they achieve mastery. This is referred to as automatization. DeKeyser (2001) hypothesized that, through practice, declarative knowledge may become *procedural knowledge* or knowledge *how*, in the same way that someone learns other skills like driving a car or skating. For automatization to be effective, materials and activities must be *valid*, that is, they must reflect the skills being measured. Materials or skills will be automatized effectively if learners have a good preliminary grasp of them. The more language the learners engage in during an activity, the more practice with it they will need, no matter how large the volume of activities, learning will not take place if they repeat unsuccessful performances. Therefore, it is important to select, design and administer practice activities in such a way that learners are likely to succeed in doing the task. Heterogeneity is important for effective automatization. Good practice activities provide opportunities for useful practice to most or all, of the varying learning levels within a class. If learners are given an activity which invites a response at only one level of knowledge, then a large proportion of the class will not benefit. The role of the teacher during automatization is to help the learners do the activities successfully. This increases the chance of success and the effectiveness of the practice activity. Finally, the interest level of the practice is important. If there is little challenge in the language work itself and there is a lot of repetition of target forms, then there is certainly a danger that the practice might be boring.

## 2.3 Autonomy

Once materials or skills are automatized, learners begin to improve on their own through further meaningful practice activities. Learners begin to speed up performance, to perceive or create new combinations, and to 'do their own thing'. At this stage learners are autonomous. They have little need of a teacher except perhaps as a supportive or challenging colleague and are ready, or nearly ready, to perform as masters of the skills, or as teachers themselves.

## 3. Methodology

The participants in this study were 107 university students from English classes in three private universities in the Kansai region in Japan who were selected using non-random quota sampling to facilitate access to the sample population. The instrument was an 18-item questionnaire designed to determine the extent of verbalization, automatization and learner autonomy in the classroom measured using the V-A-A model of skill learning.

The questionnaire was based on Ur's (2002) article on skill learning. It was written in English and Japanese and administered in both languages. Accuracy of translation was checked by an independent group of Japanese professors of English language. The questionnaire was piloted with a different group of similar participants to determine if there were any ambiguous or confusing items.

The questionnaire items were grouped into Verbalization (10 items), Automatization (7 items) and Autonomy (1 item) sections (see Appendix). Responses were scored on a 5-point scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Scores were averaged and interpreted using criteria (Table 1) adapted from an existing marking scheme for writing competence (Aliponga, 2002).

**Table 1: Criteria for Interpretation of the Average Scores**

	<b>Verbalization</b>	<b>Automatization</b>	<b>Autonomy</b>
1.0 - 1.79 (Very low)	Almost totally no presentation	Almost totally devoid of practice activities characteristics , no practice activities, no automatization	Student cannot use skill on his/her own. A lot of assistance is needed.
1.80 – 2.59 (Low)	Has a lot of problems with respect to variables for presentation	Almost totally devoid of practice activities characteristics, limited practice activities, no automatization	Student cannot use skill on his/her own. More assistance is needed
2.60 – 3.39 (Moderate)	Has a some problems with presentation in relation to the given factors	Some problems with practice activities characteristics. Few practice activities for the target skill, no automatization	Student can use skill on his/her own with some assistance from teacher or other students
3.40 – 4.19 (High)	The skill or material is presented successfully with a few problems with presentation factors	A few problems with practice activities characteristics. Practice activities not enough for full automatization	Student can use skill on his/her own with less assistance from teacher or other students
4.20 – 5.0 (Very high)	There are very few problems with presentation factors, but the presentation is very successful	Very few problems with practice activities characteristics. There are enough practice activities for full automatization	Student can use skill on his/her own.

## 4. Findings

The majority of students from the three universities gave a high rating to Verbalization (Table 2). This means that the target material or skill was presented successfully. The teacher was able to mediate new material or skill so that it was accessible for initial learning. In fact, one class (C3) of University A and two classes

(C7, C8) of University C gave a very high rating. The teachers in these classes were able to introduce new materials or skills successfully. However, despite its successful presentation, it can be noted that some variables under Verbalization were given only moderate ratings. These variables include Understanding (C5 of University B), Short-term memory (C2 of University A, C4 and C5 of University B, and C7 of University C), and Illustration (C2 of University A).

**Table 2: Average Students' Ratings of Verbalization in Their Classes**

	University A			University B		University C		
	<b>C1 (N=9)</b>	<b>C2 (N=21)</b>	<b>C3 (N=4)</b>	<b>C4 (N=20)</b>	<b>C5 (N=23)</b>	<b>C6 (N=10)</b>	<b>C7 (N=10)</b>	<b>C8 (N=10)</b>
1. Attention	3.67 (H)	3.81 (H)	4.30 (VH)	3.83 (H)	3.50 (H)	4.25 (VH)	4.45 (VH)	4.56 (VH)
2. Perception	3.67 (H)	3.62 (H)	4.25 (VH)	3.57 (H)	3.50 (H)	3.83 (H)	4.84 (VH)	4.42 (VH)
3. Understanding	3.56 (H)	3.62 (H)	4.30 (VH)	3.48 (H)	3.00 (M)	4.10 (H)	4.36 (VH)	4.42 (VH)
4. Short-term memory	3.67 (H)	3.24 (M)	4.20 (VH)	3.22 (M)	3.25 (M)	3.51 (H)	3.34 (M)	4.0 (H)
Explanations & Instructions								
5. Preparedness	3.89 (H)	3.76 (H)	4.20 (VH)	4.09 (H)	4.50 (VH)	4.20 (VH)	3.45 (VH)	3.51 (H)
6. Full attention	3.89 (H)	3.86 (H)	4.25 (VH)	4.09 (H)	3.50 (H)	4.10 (H)	4.75 (VH)	4.65 (VH)
7. Info presentation	3.78 (H)	3.86 (H)	4.65 (VH)	4.43 (VH)	4.25 (VH)	4.56 (VH)	4.10 (H)	4.56 (VH)
8. Briefness	3.56 (H)	3.57 (H)	4.25 (VH)	3.87 (H)	3.75 (H)	4.10 (H)	4.47 (VH)	3.61 (H)
9. Illustration	3.67 (H)	3.38 (M)	4.30 (VH)	4.13 (H)	4.50 (VH)	3.84 (H)	4.34 (VH)	4.00 (H)
10. Feedback	3.56 (H)	3.71 (H)	4.40 (VH)	4.13 (H)	4.25 (VH)	4.36 (VH)	4.26 (VH)	4.42 (VH)
<b>Average score</b>	<b>3.69 (H)</b>	<b>3.64 (H)</b>	<b>4.31 (VH)</b>	<b>3.88 (H)</b>	<b>3.80 (H)</b>	<b>4.08 (H)</b>	<b>4.24 (VH)</b>	<b>4.21 (VH)</b>

**Key:** VH = Very High; H = High; M = Moderate

Students of class C3 of University A and class C8 of University C rated very highly for automatization (Table 3). Other classes rated automatization somewhat less highly. In those classes, there were a few problems with practice activities characteristics. Many practice activities were utilized, but these were not enough for full automatization of the target materials or skills. The data also show that three classes gave a moderate rating for Interest (C4 of University B and C6 and C7 of University C). For these classes, it seems that the learners found the practice activities were not challenging.

All students rated autonomy highly, 6 classes rated it High and 2 classes rated it Very High (Table 4). It is clear that the majority of students saw themselves using the target skill on their own with less assistance from teachers or other students. The two classes rating their autonomy Very High believed that they could use the skills on their own with no assistance from their teacher or classmates.

**Table 3: Students' Ratings of Automatization in Their Classes**

	University A			University B		University C		
	C1 (N=9)	C2 (N=21)	C3 (N=4)	C4 (N=20)	C5 (N=23)	C6 (N=10)	C7 (N=10)	C8 (N=10)
11. Validity	3.56 (H)	3.57 (H)	4.20 (VH)	3.65 (H)	4.50 (VH)	4.42 (VH)	4.61 (VH)	4.30 (VH)
12. Pre-learning	3.56 (H)	3.52 (H)	4.20 (VH)	3.87 (H)	3.50 (H)	4.56 (VH)	4.20 (VH)	3.93 (H)
13. Volume	3.67 (H)	3.33 (M)	4.30 (VH)	3.65 (H)	3.75 (H)	4.00 (H)	4.10 (H)	4.75 (VH)
14. Success orientation	3.78 (H)	3.62 (H)	4.10 (H)	3.78 (H)	3.50 (H)	3.94 (H)	4.10 (H)	4.34 (VH)
15. Heterogeneity	3.67 (H)	3.76 (H)	4.0 (H)	3.61 (H)	4.25 (VH)	3.83 (H)	3.75 (H)	4.0 (H)
16. Teacher assistance	3.78 (H)	3.86 (H)	4.30 (VH)	3.61 (H)	3.75 (H)	4.10 (H)	4.00 (H)	4.10 (H)
17. Interest	3.67 (H)	4.0 (H)	4.30 (VH)	3.04 (M)	3.75 (H)	2.75 (M)	2.64 (M)	4.30 (VH)
<b>Average score</b>	<b>3.67 (H)</b>	<b>3.66 (H)</b>	<b>4.20 (VH)</b>	<b>3.60 (H)</b>	<b>3.86 (H)</b>	<b>3.94 (H)</b>	<b>3.91 (H)</b>	<b>4.24 (VH)</b>

**Key:** VH = Very High; H = High; M = Moderate

**Table 4: Students' Ratings of Autonomy in Their Classes**

	University A			University B		University C		
	C1 (N=9)	C2 (N=21)	C3 (N=4)	C4 (N=20)	C5 (N=23)	C6 (N=10)	C7 (N=10)	C8 (N=10)
18. Improvement on own	3.67 (H)	3.45 (H)	4.20 (VH)	3.43 (H)	3.50 (H)	3.42 (H)	4.00 (H)	4.20 (VH)

**Key:** VH = Very High; H = High; M = Moderate

## 5. Discussion

The results of the study show that full autonomy for acquiring new materials or skills was achieved in only two classrooms. As emphasized in this study, autonomy can be realized by taking into account the other stages of skills learning, that is, verbalization and automatization. Verbalisation requires effective presentation which can be achieved by taking into account the following variables: learners' attention, perception, understanding, and short-term memory; and the role of clear and comprehensible explanations. For automatization to take place, careful attention should be given to the kind of practice activities to be used in the classroom with particular attention to: validity, pre-learning, volume, success orientation, heterogeneity, teacher assistance, and interest. In addition, practice needs to be meaningful as this will result in the long term mastery of the target materials or skills which learners acquire with minimal assistance from the teacher or other students.

## 6. Implication for Classroom Teaching

There is a need for teachers to aim very high when implementing the three-stage process of skill learning. Every variable in each stage should be treated as an

important factor which can have a significant effect on promoting autonomy among learners. For students to learn something new they need to first be able to perceive and understand the presented materials or skills. An essential role of the teacher is to introduce such new materials or skills in a form most effective for initial learning (verbalisation). Language practice can contribute significantly to successful language learning (automatization). Therefore, teachers need to develop effective classroom practices. Students must use the set of behaviours they have mastered in order to improve them on their own (autonomy). Teachers can help by fostering an atmosphere where students can speed up performance, perceive or create new combinations, and ‘do their own thing.’

The three-stage process of learning a skill described in this paper is basic and commonly seen in classrooms. However, all teachers should bear in mind its importance in facilitating learner autonomy and thus should take into account the variables involved in verbalization, automatization and autonomy when designing classroom activities.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire for Students

Please circle the number that best reflects your view for each item.

SA (5) = Strongly agree とてもよくあてはまる

A (4) = Agree あてはまる

N(3) = Neither agree nor disagree どちらでもない

D (2) = Disagree あてはまらない

SD (1) = Strongly disagree まったくあてはまらない

### Verbalization/Presentation 言語化/プレゼンテーション

During the lesson.....授業中

	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I was alert, focusing my attention on the teacher and/or the materials to be learnt, and aware that something was coming that I needed to take in. これから学習する内容に意識を集中し、‘何かを学ぶ’という学習への心構えをもって授業を受けた。	1	2	3	4	5
2. I saw or heard the course materials clearly because they were clearly visible and/or audible , and were repeated in order to give added opportunities for, or reinforce, perception. 視覚・聴覚に訴える授業内容を繰り返し受けることで学習内容の理解を深め強化していった。	1	2	3	4	5
3. I understood the meaning of the materials being introduced, and their connection with other things I already know. 新しく学ぶことを理解し、すでに学習したことと関連付けることができた。	1	2	3	4	5
4. I was able to take the materials into short-term memory, that is to remember them until later in the lesson, when I had an opportunity to do further work to consolidate learning. 学習内容を学習時間内に覚えることができ、それらをきちんと身につけて、のちの授業で使えるようになった。	1	2	3	4	5

During giving of explanations and instructions for topic presentation.....

トピック・プレゼンテーションの説明や指示について

5. the teacher prepared well, for example, by thinking for a while about the words to use, the illustrations to provide, and so on; possibly even writing these out. 先生はわかりやすいことばやイラストを使って説明してくれた。具体的にあれば書いてください。	1	2	3	4	5
6. the teacher made sure we had our full attention. 先生は学生たちが授業に集中しているかを確認した。	1	2	3	4	5
7. the teacher presented the information more than once and in a different mode: for example, saying it and also writing it up on the board, to enable us to understand what we had to do. 先生の説明が一度だけではなく、ことばやボードに書くなど、さまざまな方法でおこなってくれたので、授業で何を習得しなければならないかを理解することができた。	1	2	3	4	5



8. the teacher made the explanation as brief and clear as possible. 先生の説明は手短ではっきりとしていた。	1	2	3	4	5
9. the teacher illustrated the explanation with examples of its use in various contexts, relating these as far as possible to our own lives and experiences. いろいろな例文や、学生たちの身近な暮らしや経験に関連する例をとりあげて説明してくれた。	1	2	3	4	5
10. the teacher got feedback from us, for example, asking us to paraphrase or to provide illustration, to make sure we understood the instructions. 先生はことばを言い換えて質問したり、図解をしてきちんと指示を理解しているか学生たちの反応をみた。	1	2	3	4	5

**Automatization 練習***During practice.... 練習中*

11. the activities activated me primarily in the skill or material it purported to practice. 教材を見たり、先生の説明を聞いて、いまから何をするのかを理解できた。	1	2	3	4	5
12. I had a good preliminary grasp of the activities we were required to practice. 授業で何を習得すべきかがよく理解できた。	1	2	3	4	5
13. I was able to get enough practice of the activities. 授業中に十分な練習をすることができた。	1	2	3	4	5
14. I was successful in doing the activities because those activities were carefully selected, designed and administered. 授業内容や教材が慎重に検討、構成、管理されていたので、効果的に学習することができた。	1	2	3	4	5
15. We, of different proficiency levels, benefited from the activities. 違うレベルの人がいる授業でも、それなりに学習できる。	1	2	3	4	5
16. I got assistance from the teacher when necessary. 必要に応じて先生から支援を受けた。	1	2	3	4	5
17. I found the activities challenging. 授業内容が少し難しいと感じた。	1	2	3	4	5

**Autonomy 自主学習**

18. I began to improve on my own through further practice activities. 授業でのさまざまな練習を通して、自分なりに上達し始めた。	1	2	3	4	5
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# The Contribution of the European Language Portfolio to Autonomy in Reading Skills

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## Abstract

Recently, the Council of Europe has offered the European Language Portfolio (ELP) as a tool for developing autonomy. The study reported here investigated the contribution of the ELP to autonomy in the reading skills of Turkish high school learners of English. Participants were twenty students selected on the basis of their responses to a questionnaire based on to the items in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). A self-assessment checklist was also conducted as a pre-test to cross-check the study group. The group was taught reading through materials prepared for the levels in CEFR. Every student read several books (fiction) during the learning process and kept a portfolio which contained the products of several activities related to reading and also book reports they prepared. After one semester the self-assessment checklist was administered again as a post-test. Retrospective interviews were also conducted to discover participants' views of the course. The study revealed that the ELP made an important contribution to the participants' autonomy in reading.

**Key words:** language teaching, autonomy, reading, European Language Portfolio, ELP, Turkish secondary students

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## 1. Introduction

Reading is very important for learning a foreign language especially in countries like Turkey which is distant from English native-speaking countries making opportunities for conversing in the target language limited. For learners to achieve meaningful learning through reading, they need appropriate strategies. While many have been tried they have not been found satisfactory for learners. Indeed, learners themselves complain that their reading skills are still insufficient (Bedir, 1998). It is widely believed that students do not read many books. Students themselves say they do not

like reading and they do not understand what they read. A new approach to encourage reading is necessary.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) of the Council of Europe may provide a new approach to developing language learning skills, including reading. It has three necessary components (Little, 2002):

- **language passport:** recording the learner's linguistic identity including: languages learnt, experience of language use and a self-assessment of current proficiency in those languages
- **language biography:** recording language learning targets, progress and special experiences (related to language or culture)
- **dossier:** recording evidence of language proficiency and intercultural experience

The ELP helps learners learn languages more effectively and think about how they learn; and it provides a record of language abilities and progress to show to others (Ludlow, 2008). The ELP also provides significant new concepts and tools for language teachers and students to proceed towards a holistic view of foreign language education. The ELP is also connected to the Common European Framework (CEF) which defines foreign language proficiency at three main levels (basic user, independent user, proficient user) in relation to five skills (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing) (Kohonen, 2004). In addition to its reporting function the ELP has the pedagogical functions of making the language learning process more transparent to the learner and fostering the development of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is a prerequisite for effective language learning because it enables learners to develop a sense of responsibility, awareness and self-reflection where they can manage to study on their own more efficiently (Balçıkanlı, 2008, p. 12).

The purpose of the study described here is to answer the following questions:

- Does ELP help language learners become autonomous learners?
- To what extent is ELP effective in promoting autonomy in reading skills?
- What are the attitudes of learners towards language study through ELP?

## 2. Methodology

This study used a questionnaire and self-assessment checklist to collect quantitative data; and interviews and students' portfolios to collect qualitative data.

### 2.1 The participants

The participants were 20 students aged between 13 and 15 in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade a private high school in Erzurum. They were selected on the basis of their responses to a questionnaire consisting of the A2, B1 and B2 items in the CEFR which was administered to a large group (45) of similar students. The 20 students at level A2 were formed into a single class and became the study group. The group consisted of male and female students as gender was not considered a variable. During the period of the study the participants learnt English as a foreign language to which the ELP was applied for the first time.

## 2.2 Data collection instruments

The questionnaire, which had items adapted from the self-assessment grids of the CEFR, was conducted at the beginning of the study. The CEFR self-assessment checklist was used at the beginning and again at the end of the semester. It contained sample ‘Can-Do’ statements and used a five-point likert scale with the following choices: (5) Always, (4) Frequently, (3) Occasionally, (2) Rarely, (1) Never. At the beginning of the study the checklist confirmed the A2 level of the study group and at the end it looked for any change. At the end of the study, students’ portfolios (the ELPs) were also collected. They contained study material, checklists, reflections and book reports. At the end of the study, interviews were also conducted to determine participants’ perceptions of the contribution of the ELP in developing their autonomy in reading.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1 The results of the self-assessment checklist

The self-assessment checklist, which was used to measure reading proficiency levels of the participants, showed that by the end of the study almost all students felt more autonomous and successful in their in reading skills after using the ELP (Table 1). They also found that the process of studying for the ELP was very useful.

**Table 1: The Results of the Pre- and Post- Self-assessment Checklists**

	<b>Always</b>	<b>Frequently</b>	<b>Occasion-ally</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>
Before using ELP	46%	34.5%	16.8%	2.8%	0%
After using ELP	57.5%	40%	2.5%	0%	0%

### 3.2 The results of students’ use of the ELP

At the end of the semester, portfolios were collected but many students were not willing for their work to be used in this study. Although we were not able to analyse many of the portfolios for this study, as teachers we can report the portfolios were generally filled with class work, fill-in-the blanks, exercises related to the readings and activities for including in the ELP (see Appendix 1 for some examples of portfolio work from students who gave permission). Students pointed out that keeping a portfolio was an important part of the learning process because they learnt many new things as they were doing activities. Portfolios also helped students plan, monitor and evaluate activities themselves.

All students in the study group read many story books of level 1, 2, and 3. Every student prepared a book report for every book he read. All book reports were included in students’ portfolios. A book report consists of basic information about the book, exercises related to vocabulary and sentences in the book, and a short summary written in the student’s own words. The students said they enjoyed choosing what they read themselves and this consisted of adventures, action, short stories, love, horror, legend, miracles etc. For these students there was clearly a level of autonomy related to the reading. They had a choice of stories and when to read them. They also had some freedom in how to use them for learning and how to

report on them. This freedom is important because everyone must read according to their interests and experiences because everyone has different interests, information and experiences.

### 3.3 Results of student interviews

At the end of the study all participants were interviewed to illuminate unclear points and gather more information about participants' perceptions of the role of the ELP in giving them autonomy in their reading.

#### **The students' feeling about the ELP**

When asked about the ELP, students' responses were generally positive, for example:

The ELP was very useful for our foreign language learning. In this system, one can realize easily his level and know better what he should do while studying foreign language. I think that I can reach to my targets as better, more conscious, more useful. ELP really contributes to my individual success. I enjoyed much more from done activities especially preparing a brochure of a city. (Student N)

This process was very positive and useful for me. I think that I can develop much more my foreign language and ability with the ELP in the learning process. I also consider that the ELP is useful not only for me but also my other classmates. (Student S)

We may conclude from the responses that they believe that studying process with the ELP were helpful for them.

Interviewees were also asked were about the effect of the ELP on learner autonomy. Most of the students stated that the ELP helped them to understand their learning aims. Many of them also believed the ELP made a great contribution to their understanding, for example:

The ELP really helped us understand our learning aims because I have studied my lessons according to my aims since at the beginning of the semester. The ELP showed us that the foreign language will help me not only at the school but also all around my life. (Student S)

The ELP was very effective in order to develop my foreign language. In addition, I developed my ability of foreign language with the ELP and I realized that I would be able to increase my level of foreign language myself especially for my reading abilities. (Student E)

Most of the students also pointed out that the ELP had helped them to assess their own language skills and they could compare the assessments of their teacher with their self-assessments. For example, they expressed that before in foreign language lesson all of the students were studying the same way they did in Maths or Physics and they knew all teachers of foreign language were teaching like teachers of other subjects. But after they met the ELP, they realized that their teacher of English as a foreign language could teach according to their level. Almost all students also accepted that the ELP helped them to see their process of learning. The following examples illustrate these points:

The ELP helped me to assess my own language skills. For example, this level A2 showed me which level book I could read. Firstly, I borrowed a story book level 1 but I realized that level 1 was too easy for me and then I took level 3 but it was too difficult for me because there were subjects which we have not studied yet. Finally, I borrowed level 2. While I was reading it, I realized that level 2 was suitable for me. Besides, I could assess my comprehension and interpretation with the ELP myself while reading a book. (Student I)

The ELP was very useful to compare the assessments of both our teacher and us. Because our teacher was teaching according to our level and we were also studying with documents according to our level. (Student O)

It helped me to see my process of learning. Especially, I have not thought that I could understand myself a reading book until I met the ELP, but I understood that I will be able to read and understand myself a book. (Student Y)

According to Koyuncu (2006, p. 47) to become an autonomous learner it is essential to review learning regularly and assess the effectiveness of the learning process. The following examples taken from the interviews show evidence that these students are aware of these requirements:

The ELP helped me to see my own process of learning. I have never studied with this system before but I have thought that I developed my foreign language step by step. Indeed, I began to read and speak like my father. (Student S)

The ELP always provided to see my capabilities in foreign language. Although I have known enough vocabulary and grammar, I have not dared read a book, but I saw that I could read a book with the ELP. (Student B)

Most of the students stated that they participated in the learning process because they felt courageous in the classroom since the level of everyone was the same. When they compared with their previous learning process, they concluded that the ELP encouraged them to participate in the learning process much more, for example:

We, all the students, were at the same level in the class and I felt more courageous among my friends. So, I participated in the lessons much more. In addition, I studied lessons myself, read story books myself, and did activities and exercises myself at my level. (Student E)

Most of the students also pointed out that the ELP helped them to take responsibility for their learning, for example:

Since the level of the students is has the same, I felt more responsible. I have known that I would fall down from A2 to A1 if I did not study someday. So, I realized responsibilities which I should do and how I would study them. Besides, I felt more determined while studying because my aim has better learning and is to pass B1 level. (Student N)

In addition, the interviews revealed the students view that they always studied together with the ELP, and they did a lot of studies with the ELP in the learning process. Whenever they went through their ELP, they could check what they had learned and what kind of responsibilities they had. Moreover, they stated that the

“can do” checklists, made them aware of their improvement in their learning. Consequently, they pointed out that the ELP contributed much to their learning process.

## 4. Conclusion

This study investigated the contribution of the ELP to autonomy in the reading skills of Turkish learners of English by looking at the learners’ perceptions of the ELP as part of their learning process. Both the qualitative and quantitative results of the study indicate that the ELP makes an important contribution to autonomy in reading skills. The majority of the students felt positive towards the ELP and, under its influence, studied autonomously in reading. Most of the students realized that they read in English on their own, evaluated themselves and developed their reading skills themselves. Some students who had not previously enjoyed reading books or learning foreign languages had their views changed by the ELP which made them feel more positive about learning a foreign language and more courageous in reading.

Although this is a small study with the consequent limitations it goes some way to answering our research questions by showing that the ELP made an important contribution to developing the autonomous reading skills of these students.

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## Appendix 1: Tasks and Examples from Portfolios


Example Task 1

Istanbul

Istanbul is famous for its ramparts, fortresses and towers as well. Some of these were for non-defence aims after the conquest of Istanbul, and also couldn't be saved because of suffering rack and ruin from the effects of centuries. Dating from the 17th century, this is one of the largest mosques in Istanbul and is one of the principal features on Istanbul's skyline. On the east side of mosque is the Arasta a bazaar for the various tradesmen's guilds.



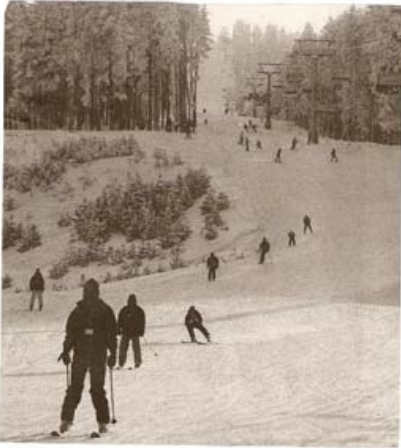
A vast labyrinth of little streets lined with over 4000 shops selling rugs, pottery, jewellery and countless other goodies. Within 15 minutes of the Istanbul hotel.



Example Task 2

ERZURUM - PALANDÖKEN - Something for everyone

If you come to Turkey, you must come to Erzurum. Because Erzurum is very great city. Erzurum has got a lot of historical places and wonderful skiing center. Name of skiing center is Palandöken. It is in the south of Erzurum.



If you like snow, you can play snow ball with your friends.  
If you like adventure, you can get on the cable car.  
If you want to take clear air, you must climb the Palandöken mountain.

Palandöken skiing center <sup>the</sup> biggest and most developed skiing center of Turkey.

I think, if you come to Palandöken mountain, you will be pleased.

Come on to Erzurum, come!  
Erzurum is pretty, beautiful!



## **Part 3**

# **Perceptions of Learner Autonomy**

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## The Effects of Out-of-Class Use of English on Autonomy Perception

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### Abstract

Out-of-class language learning is important in the practice of autonomy. In this study, the effects of out-of-class use of English on the perception of autonomy were investigated with 34 university students who learn English in preparation classes in the School of Foreign Languages at Dokuz Eylül University. An Autonomy Perception Scale was used before and after a 10-week period in which participants were anonymously paired and exchanged letters with each other. The activity took place out of class, was on a voluntary basis and was not included in course assessment. An analysis of the results was augmented by interviews with participants. Results show that after the letter-writing activity the participants had higher levels of autonomy perception. The difference was statistically significant. The participants reported that the activity contributed to their autonomous learning experiences as well as their language learning.

**Key words:** autonomy perception, meta-cognitive strategy use, language learning, out-of-class use of English, Turkish tertiary students

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### 1. Introduction

English language learning is affected by a number of different factors. One of them is the educational setting in which the target language is learnt. As Ryan (1997) pointed out, learning English as a second language (ESL) and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) occur in completely different educational settings. ESL settings are richer in target language resources compared to EFL settings. Although the difference between the two is narrowing thanks to technological developments, it is still more difficult for EFL learners to use the target language in the real world. ESL learners are mostly immigrants in L1 English speaking countries so they are able to hear, read, see, and speak the language in real settings. On the other hand, EFL learners are responsible for finding settings outside school where the target language is used, for example: the internet, participation in certain activities and using self-access centres. It is critical for learners to take advantage of as many opportunities as they can to learn and use the target language. That is to say, these learners should be autonomous. Autonomous learners are those who seek the opportunities to learn

outside classroom setting and create their own instructional settings freed from the teacher (Breen & Mann, 1997).

Learner autonomy is defined as “the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 8) and autonomous learning is when learners use this capacity. In order to understand the term better, Little (1994, p. 81) noted what autonomy is not:

- Autonomy is not a synonym for self-instruction; in other words, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher
- In the classroom context, autonomy does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; it is not a matter of letting the learners get on with things as best they can
- On the other hand, autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is not another teaching method
- Autonomy is not a single, easily described behaviour
- Autonomy is not a steady state achieved by learners

Autonomy is an essential characteristic for a good language learner. The importance of autonomy in language learning can be observed in Omaggio’s definition of a good language learner (cited in Wenden, 1991) which characterizes good language learners as people who are aware of their learning styles and strategies and know how to adapt them for different learning conditions; know about their strengths and weaknesses; and use every opportunity to communicate in the target language. Esch emphasizes that autonomy already exists in learning process naturally:

Humans are not only able to adapt to different languages and different learning conditions, but also to progress in their ability to learn, by becoming aware of the processes through which they learn, by conceptualizing their learning experience, by being actively engaged in steering the process and by taking responsibility for organizing their learning experience. (Esch, 1996, pp. 37-8)

In classrooms, however, teachers interfere with the learning process of the learners. As Holec (1985) states “learning to learn” and “making someone learn” are completely contradictory. The key to fostering autonomy seems to be support. Support given by teachers may be technical such as teaching learners some strategies, cognitive or meta-cognitive. It may also be a psycho-social support where the teacher encourages learners to take control of their own learning and assists them in gaining self-confidence. Of course, the teacher has to learn to help the learner learn which requires teacher training.

The fostering of autonomy is clearly desirable in language teaching. Teachers should support their learners using different methods. As Benson (2001, p. 224) mentioned “autonomy takes a variety of forms, there is no single best method of fostering it”. Studying different methods may contribute to fostering learner autonomy in language learning settings. This leads to the following research question which is the focus of this paper:

*What are the effects of out-of-class use of English on autonomy perception?*

## 2. Methodology

An experimental design without a control group was used in this study.

### 2.1 Sample

The participants in the study were 34 (15 females and 19 males) university students who were learning English in preparation classes in the School of Foreign Languages at Dokuz Eylül University in the academic year 2009-10. The participants were volunteers and they were informed that this practice would not be graded as a part of the course assessment.

### 2.2 Instruments

The Autonomy Perception Scale: A thirty-eight item and five-point Likert Scale was developed by the researcher and piloted in the same context in 2007. The final version of the scale used for the current study had four sub-scales, namely; taking language learning responsibility (17 items), using meta-cognitive strategies (9 items), English activities outside the school (7 items), and associating language with real life (5 items). The Cronbach Alpha Reliability of the whole scale was 0.90.

### 2.3 Procedure

The 34 participants were given the Autonomy Perception Scale before the out-of-class activity began. They were then paired-up for a letter writing activity but without knowing who their partner was. The researcher acted as the postman during the process. They were informed that no details about their identity such as their names, classrooms, and their teachers' names could be written in their letters. The purpose behind this idea was to prevent students from contacting each other and communicating in Turkish rather than English. One of the other purposes was to motivate students with a fun activity. Participants started writing letters to each other in December 2009. They each wrote ten letters. Each letter was examined by the researcher in order to delete personal information if there was any. Corrections were avoided since students were observed to correct their own mistakes. At the end of the letter writing procedure, the participants were given the Autonomy Perception Scale again. The data was analysed by the researcher using statistical calculations.

### 2.4 Limitations of the study

Several limitations in this study should be noted. First, this study included only intermediate-level English learners at the School of Foreign Languages at Dokuz Eylül University, in Turkey. Second, only writing letters in English was considered as an out-of-class use of English. Other out-of-class uses of English activities were not included in the study. The students' personal language studies, a possible important contextual element, were not included in the study.

## 3. Findings and Results

### 3.1 Comparison of pre-and post-activity questionnaire results

First of all, the participants' answers for the pre-activity questionnaire and the post-activity questionnaire were compared using a paired-sample t-test (Table 1). The results show that all participants answered the whole questionnaire. The mean for the first questionnaire was 3.28, whereas for the second it was 3.41. The data suggests

that there is a significant difference between the pre- and post-questionnaires which can be related to the treatment. The participants had higher levels of autonomy perception after they had participated in the letter writing project.

**Table 1: Perceptions of the Effects of Out-of-class Use of English**

Questionnaire	N	M	Sd	df	t
Pre-questionnaire	34	3.28	0.35	33	0.03*
Post-questionnaire	34	3.41			

$p < 0.05$

The sub-scales of the Autonomy Perception Scale were also analysed individually to provide more detailed results. Table 2 shows the comparison of pre- and post-activity responses for the first sub-scale which is about taking language learning responsibility. The mean score for the post-questionnaire is higher than in the pre-questionnaire. This suggests that participants' perceptions of taking responsibility for language learning was affected positively by the treatment. However, the difference is not statistically non-significant.

**Table 2: Perceptions about Taking Responsibility for Language Learning (Sub-scale 1)**

Questionnaire	N	M	Sd	df	T
Pre-questionnaire	34	3.47	0.47	33	0.42
Post-questionnaire	34	3.53			

Results for using meta-cognitive strategies (sub-scale 2) show a statistically significant difference and suggest that after the treatment, participants started to use meta-cognitive strategies more or they were more aware of the strategies they used while learning a language (Table 3).

**Table 3: Perceptions about Using Meta-cognitive Strategies (Sub-scale 2)**

Questionnaire	N	M	Sd	df	t
Pre-questionnaire	34	3.32	0.53	33	0.01*
Post-questionnaire	34	3.56			

$p \leq 0.01$

In relation to activities outside of school (sub-scale 3) the pre- and post-activity results show a significant difference (Table 4). It seems that after the treatment the students participated in more activities outside the school.

**Table 4: Perceptions about English Activities Outside the School (sub-scale 3)**

Questionnaire	N	M	Sd	df	t
Pre-questionnaire	34	3.77	0.41	33	0.00*
Post-questionnaire	34	4.03			

$p < 0.01$

The final sub-scale in the Autonomy Perception Scale was about associating language with real life (Table 5). There is no statistically significant difference although there is a slight decrease in the mean. This may result from the reality that Turkey is a non-English speaking country. Language learners in Turkey have difficulty associating the target language with real life since English is not used widely outside of school.

**Table 5: Perceptions about Associating Language with Real Life (sub-scale 4)**

Questionnaire	N	M	Sd	Df	t
Pre-questionnaire	34	1.69	0.40	33	0.93
Post-questionnaire	34	1.68			

### 3.2 Interviews

Six randomly chosen participants were video-interviewed. The findings were analysed according to the sub-scales of the Autonomy Perception Scale. Extracts relevant to the points investigated in this paper are shown below:

#### Taking responsibility for learning

Participants showed signs of making decisions about what they needed or wanted to do to enhance the learning experience.

**Alaaddin:** Sometimes there were words that I didn't know. Then, I checked them in dictionaries and understood what he/she meant. And I remember those words when I see them again. I tell myself "ohh, I saw it in one of my letters". When I see a word in an exercise in a book, I forget it easily but I don't forget the things in the letters, because I am interested in it more.

**İbrahim:** You say, "I saw it in my letter" at least. I mean, your pen-friend uses a new word, and you check it in the dictionary, and while checking you learn alternative meanings of that new word.

**Gülizar:** We have learnt different words since we started to write to a pen-friend. My pen-friend used different words, I used them. I searched for new words. I tried to use new structures I learnt in the courses. I learnt the words that my pen-friend used. For example, I started to understand some lyrics in English songs because I read them in letters. Because it has enriched my use of vocabulary.

**Merve:** I used phrasal verbs, tenses, and passive structures. The activity was effective. I tried to use daily English, some reactions and slangs that English people use. I mean, it contributed to my English.

**Kübra:** I was checking some grammar structures. It improved my use of vocabulary. I looked up the words I need on the Internet or I used dictionaries. I tried to write sentences that are used in daily life.

### **Meta-cognition**

One of the participants mentioned that if the level of her pen-friend had been higher than hers, she would have improved more. However, she was aware that she somehow contributed to her pen-friend's language improvement. These opinions may be related to the meta-cognitive strategy use of that student since she was evaluating her improvement and her contribution to her pen-friend's improvement.

**Merve:** ..my pen-friend could have been in a better level so I could have improved my English more. Or, maybe my level was better than him/her so I helped his/her improvement. For me, I feel something was missing because of my pen-friend.

However, some students thought being in the same level made them feel more confident while writing in a different language. This is also evidence of meta-cognitive engagement:

**Alaaddin:** English is now easier for me, it used to seem harder.

**Gülizar:** My level of English was the same with my pen-friend's. Therefore, I didn't feel anything negative.

**Alaaddin:** While we were writing to each other I noticed that his/her English is the same with me. He/she tries to use similar words and structures.

Some students' comments also showed their understanding of the transferability of the skills and language they were learning, for example:

**Kübra:** I had never thought that it would contribute to my English. Then, I started to think that I could use the things I learnt in my letters.

**Alaaddin:** I tried to use the things I learnt in letters in the courses. First, I thought that I could only use them for that activity, and then I realized that I started to use them in my school work. English is now easier for me, it used to seem harder.

### **Impact of English language activities outside school work**

The participants found the activity enjoyable and useful, especially in practicing vocabulary and searching for new information. They started to organize their learning and they had opportunity to use the target language outside school.

**Emre:** Waiting for a letter from someone else every week was so exciting.

**Gülizar:** I started to enjoy the lessons more, I tried to learn new things to use them in my letters.

**Emre:** It taught a lot of things. I tried to use all the vocabulary and sentences that I learnt and I learnt many things while writing. I believe our teachers observed this improvement, too. I observed it in my exam results, too.

### **Associating the language with real life**

There is clear evidence that participants see the usefulness of what they learned for their lives, for example:

**İbrahim:** It helped us associate English with real life. We started to search for books, we asked our teachers' help. We started to ask "how can we say this in a different way?" We weren't satisfied with the similar structures.

**Emre:** I have foreign friends in my dormitory. I talk to them. I try to practice what I learn with them. Sometimes I have difficulty in understanding them since their pronunciation is different, but we can communicate.

**Merve:** I tried to find a pen-friend; I logged in some web-sites. Then, I watched some movies in English and read poems in English to recommend to my pen-friend.

## **4. Conclusions**

After the letter-writing activity the participants had overall higher levels of autonomy perception and this difference was statistically significant. In the area of taking responsibility for language learning (sub-scale 1) there was a small positive move although it cannot be shown to be statistically significant. Participants' perceptions of meta-cognitive strategies (sub-scale 2) and English activities outside school (sub-scale 3) both became more positive after the letter-writing activity and these changes were statistically significant. Although participants reported that they had an opportunity to associate English with real life (sub-scale 4) there was a slightly negative move in their perceptions of doing so after the activity and, as suggested, this might be explained by an increasing awareness of the reality of their situation. In the interviews, all the participants reported that they had found the letter-writing activity useful. They found the activity especially useful to practice new vocabulary, grammar structures, and newly learned subjects. The participants also reported that they felt comfortable while writing in another language because their pen-friends' levels were similar to theirs. Only one of the participants noted that being at a similar level may have affected her improvement negatively. All the participants enjoyed the activity. While engaging in this out-of-class activity, participants accessed information in different ways such as checking dictionaries, books, consulting teachers and friends, and using the internet.

## **5. Recommendations**

1. Letter-writing activity may be used in preparatory classes or in any language classes in EFL settings. It is enjoyable for students and it is cheap.
2. Achievement tests may be given to the students to see if there is an improvement in their level of English.
3. If possible, students from different countries where English is used as a foreign language can write to each other. The internet can be used in this type of activity.



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## Egyptian Students' Readiness for Autonomous Language Learning

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### Abstract

Due to the constant increase in the number of students joining the Engineering College at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport and the difficulty of ensuring successful learning in conventional classroom settings, there arises the need for utilizing e-learning and/or distance learning in language teaching/learning in the hope that those learners could benefit more from integrating different modes of learning, implemented outside the classroom. Such different modes assume some kind of capability and responsibility on the learners' part in order to attain successful and effective language learning. Students are expected to responsibly make use of the available resources and display certain abilities and skills of autonomous learners. Moving from a teacher- to a learner-centred approach in language teaching may promote autonomous learning among those students. However, prior to any changes in the present teaching/learning environment, it is necessary to investigate whether Engineering students, who are studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP), are ready to become autonomous language learners. This paper reports on a study to ascertain the readiness for language learning autonomy of freshmen students enrolled in the College.

**Key words:** beliefs, modes of learning, learner-centred, English for Specific Purposes, ESP, readiness, language learning, autonomy, Egypt

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### 1. Introduction

The Egyptian educational context has long been criticized as teacher-centred in nature. The educational system in Egypt as well as in most Arab countries has been fostering rote-learning and memorization of facts instead of encouraging students to be creative, innovative and productive of knowledge (Gahin & Myhill, 2001). So the concept of learner autonomy may be relatively new to Egyptian learners. Over the last decades and in the field of English language teaching, there has been a shift from the traditional English language settings to a more communicative based approach to English language teaching (as defined by Nunan & Lamb, 1996) and in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where the focus is on the learner (as defined by

Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The learner and teacher interaction is essential for the communicative approach to be successfully implemented. The communicative approach redefines the roles of the teacher and the learners. Instead of regarding the teacher as the sole figure of authority in the classroom (Gahin & Myhill, 2001) and the only source of knowledge, the teacher should be a guide, advisor, counsellor and facilitator for the learning process. Little (1995) draws attention to the fact that autonomy does not advocate total independence of the teacher. Autonomy exists in degrees and learners should be trained to develop their capabilities to reach the status of full autonomy in learning (Nunan, 1996, 1997). In other words, autonomy does not weaken the role of the teacher in learning, but it modifies it to help learners rely more on their own internal capabilities than on external factors (Littlewood, 1999). In brief, for learners to be autonomous, they should be able to navigate their way through their learning resources and share responsibility for their own learning.

To accommodate the new unconventional educational approaches and modern trends in technological resources and facilities nowadays, namely multimedia resources, electronic gadgets and equipment, self-access learning centres, etc., the integration of technology in the teaching/learning process and curriculum design has been recently unavoidable and inevitable in the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, AASTMT. Implementing technology in language learning could also be based on the conception that computer-based learning transcends time and space barriers. Developing an ESP mixed-mode course, for example an ESP textbook with electronic based components, could offer students more practice opportunities and increase the time they spend on a particular task at their own pace. Learners could easily access their English language courses and teaching/learning resources at convenient times as many times as they like and anywhere they are. Integrating computer mediated communication and/or electronic resources for self-study or self-directed learning may also render the teaching materials more motivating, appealing and thought-provoking. Students might then be encouraged to get more involved in and excited about the learning process. However, to ensure the utmost benefit from the different learning settings and prior to any changes in such settings, it is essential to examine the students' beliefs about their language learning process and whether they are *ready* to become autonomous and take advantage of the surrounding educational resources and facilities. It is assumed that students' beliefs, reflected by the meta-cognitive strategies which they implement in the learning process, might, in turn, reveal their readiness for language learning autonomy. This paper begins by defining the two important constructs: autonomy and beliefs. Secondly, it explains in detail the present study to find out what learners believe about their own language learning process. The paper ends with some recommendations.

## 2. Literature Review

Several theorists and researchers defined the concept of autonomy as the *capacity* for being independent and in charge of one's own learning and for being able to choose what would be suitable for one's learning needs from a variety of learning facilities and resources (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987, 1995; Holec, 1981; Little, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Thanasoulas, 2000; White, 1995, 1999). Dickinson (1995) clarified that *capacity* should entail the learners' ability to internalize a system that might accompany them not only throughout their traditional teacher-centred classroom setting, but also in non-conventional classroom learning contexts such as self-access

learning centres. Littlewood also explained that autonomy had two major components: "ability" and "willingness": ability included both "knowledge" about the various choices offered to the learner and the "skills" for implementing such choices, whereas "willingness" entailed "motivation and the confidence to take responsibility" for one's decisions (Littlewood, 1996, p. 428). Sinclair (2010) argued that teachers could not turn their students into autonomous learners, but they could encourage them to reflect on and experiment with their learning processes and strategies, given that the learners would be willing and motivated to take control of their own learning. Dam (2010) also stressed the two important elements of students' willingness and capacity to learn as key elements in promoting learner autonomy. Thus, developing learners' autonomy means developing learners' "ability" and "willingness" together with knowledge, skills, motivation and confidence (Benson, 2001; Youssef, 2006).

Since beliefs are regarded as key determinants of the individual's behaviour during the learning process (Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Siegel, 1985) understanding learners' beliefs has become central as it may reveal whether learners have positive beliefs that could lead to successful learning, or misconceptions and negative beliefs that could hinder language learning (Horwitz, 1988). In language learning, beliefs are defined as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors affecting learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockart, 1995, p. 224). Wenden (1998) reports that learners' beliefs refer to the meta-cognitive knowledge on how to learn and is acquired through their learning experience. In addition, meta-cognitive knowledge, which entails information on the meta-cognitive strategies, could develop, change and improve over time. Among those strategies are planning, monitoring and evaluating one's own learning and progress (Wenden, 1998). Flavell (1979) adds to the meta-cognitive knowledge which learners have about themselves two more types of knowledge: the task knowledge which learners have about the learning task and the strategic knowledge about the strategies which they could use to carry out the task. In relation to Flavell's meta-cognitive knowledge and Wenden's meta-cognitive skills and strategies, Murray (2009) is more concerned with meta-cognition in relation to imagination in a self-access language learning setting. He stresses the important construct of the learners' sense of self in second language self-directed learning. Sinclair (2010) argues that learners seek their teachers' assistance to develop the meta-cognitive knowledge about themselves as learners, the learning context and processes. In brief, exploring the learners' beliefs could help in explaining particular learners' success or failure in language learning as well as their degree of readiness to become self-directed, inquisitive and independent learners. Therefore, the present study aims to find out how those learners' previous language experience could have affected their perceptions of and views on the role of the teacher, the role of the learner and their opinion of themselves as language learners, and finally the role of their teachers' and peers' feedback. The findings should reveal the students' status of readiness to become autonomous language learners.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants were freshmen students enrolled in the College of Engineering in the Academy on their first day of the academic year of 2008/2009, prior to any college teaching. Participants were 69% males and 31% females. Ages ranged from

16 to 20 with about 75% aged between 17 and 18. The majority of participants were Egyptians (92%) and the remainder Arabs. The mother tongue of all participants was Arabic. The majority had obtained their high school certificate from Egypt (82%) and other Arab countries (16%) thus their previous learning experience was of a conventional educational system, i.e. examination-oriented and teacher-centred. The authoritative role of the teacher, the didactic mode of instruction and rote-learning and memorisation of information are the norm in that educational setting (Gahin & Myhill, 2001).

It is commonly assumed, though sometimes mistakenly, that students who enrol in colleges such as those of Engineering, Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry are hardworking, intelligent, self-reliant and motivated learners. This assumption is based on their final results of the last year of high school that enable them to join the so called *top* colleges in Egypt. Since the Academy tuition fees are considered above average, it is also assumed that those students enrolled in the College of Engineering are ranked slightly above the average socio-economic class. Demographic data on the students' educational, socio-economic and cultural context was collected.

### 3.2 Instrument

A questionnaire was distributed to the participants on their first day of classes. The questionnaire was an adaptation of Youssef's (2006) questionnaire from her recent study on the Arab Academy's Business students' beliefs about language learning in a web-based setting which, itself, was an adaptation (with permission) of Cotterall's questionnaire (1999) on learners' beliefs about key factors in successful language learning that might reflect learners' autonomy. The questions were related to learners' beliefs about the language learning process with regard to the following variables: the role of the teacher, role of the learners and their sense of self-efficacy, and the role of feedback (Cotterall, 1999). Subjects ranked statements on a Likert scale of five: ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree with an undecided option.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 18.0) was used to obtain frequencies for single items. The total number of students whose questionnaire responses proved valid was 265 students. As mentioned earlier, demographic data were sought to be able to interpret the results and parents' occupation was considered as a marker of socio-economic class. The participants' parents' occupations fall into the five categories shown in Table 1.

The majority (90%) of the student sample attended private language schools in junior, middle and high school stages. All participants are native speakers of Arabic and the majority studied English at school combined with other foreign languages, such as French and/or German. Some also have experienced living in an English speaking country for some time. Most of the students use English when speaking with their parents and friends. Many students are members of international youth charity clubs (e.g. Alpha Leo or Rotar Act), associations or organizations (e.g. AISEC), and therefore are obliged to communicate with others in English or other foreign languages. In addition, being a member of such communities indicates a high socio-economic class. This constant use of English for their studies in college and their day-to-day communications may explain their strong positive response to

studying English (70% support studying English during college). However, responses differ in the preferred duration of study with less than half the sample in favour of studying English during all their years of college.

**Table 1: Participants' Parents' Occupations**

Occupation	Father	Mother
Professional (e.g. physicians, engineers, officers and companies employees)	75%	32%
Business	12%	1%
Academic (e.g. teachers, professors)	8%	15%
Manual (e.g. farmers, mechanics, carpenters, security person)	1.5%	0%
Stay at home parent	0%	53%

One third of the students believe that English language courses at college should enable them to develop main language skills, such as reading, writing, listening and speaking; another third indicate that these courses should focus on teaching communication skills, such as public speech, presentations, interviews and correspondences; a small number (5%) want research skills, such as dictionary checking, net surfing, data collection and library work; and 30% of participants want all the above. As almost all (95%) do not see a need to learn research skills in the English language class it can be assumed that most students are teacher-dependent and that they mistakenly believe it is not an appropriate place to learn research skills.

As a mode of study for English two thirds of the participants prefer face-to-face learning, i.e. where the teacher is present in class as the sole mode of instruction and source of knowledge, echoing the results of Gahin and Myhill's (2001) study showing that learners view the teacher as the knowledge transmitter. Only 16% prefer to combine that mode with books, CDs and DVDs; with on-line learning; or with both. Some participants (12%) preferred *book style study packages with CDs and DVDs* and 13% preferred such a mode combined with other modes. *Distance learning and online courses* was preferred by 9%, or 11% if combined with other modes. This seems a clear indication of students' reluctance for change in their language learning environment, even though engineering students could be expected to be biased toward the use of technology for learning than other students in different disciplines (Hozayen, 2009).

It can be inferred from the above data that these freshmen students are not yet ready to be fully autonomous. They are probably dependent on their teachers or feel more secure when surrounded by them. It could be argued that these students might occasionally use the book packages with CDs and DVDs, but they are unlikely to choose on-line courses, both of which require them to be able to study on their own and independently of the teacher. In addition, the students' preferences might also be explained by their learning experience at schools where they were more accustomed to one particular study mode than another. Further follow up on such a sample is recommended to find out if their perception will change as they progress with their

study at college. At that stage in their lives, the sample students might not be able to evaluate the effectiveness of other modes in their learning process.

For ease of reference and viewing, the rating responses for the Likert scale were reduced from five to three categories of: disagree, undecided and agree. Results show that the majority of students agree that *learning English at college is useful* (92%) and that *it is necessary* (90%). About 93% restate their positive responses to statements that describe English as helpful in the short run making them *easily understand other subject courses taught in English* as well as in the long run since *mastering English will offer them better job opportunities*. This shows that they may have extrinsic motivation to study English at college. Such motivation explains why the majority of students (91%) agree to *exert great efforts to learn English during college* when necessary in contrast to those (62%) who believe that *they exerted efforts at school*. Motivation in general might be a key factor in the students' readiness to learn. This concurs with the view that "motivation is a key factor that influences the extent to which learners are ready to learn autonomously, and that teachers might therefore endeavour to ensure motivation before they train students to become autonomous" (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002, p. 245).

When asking the learners about the amount of time which they spend studying English, 60% of participants agree that they *study English on a regular basis*. Only 32% agree it was *comfortable to spend long continuous hours studying*, while 54% expressed that it was *uncomfortable to attend a class longer than an hour*. This is opposite to the assumption that those students are hard-working and are used to studying during school time. Despite that, two thirds of participants say they can *study anywhere if necessary*, 71% *use their laptops or PCs to finish their assignments quickly*, and 65% like to *spend many hours surfing the net for their research projects*. In spite of the students' preferences to stay away from the conventional classroom setting and to find a more comfortable zone with a friendly atmosphere to study, they are not willing to do so for their language classes. More research should be carried out to find out whether students in other educational settings and other disciplines may have the same perceptions toward their language learning. It is important that learners should not be hurdled by a certain type of learning setting, which might not encourage them to work or study.

The results also show that 54% of the sample agree they are *studying English well by themselves*, while 76% believe that they are *successfully interacting with their teacher in class*. Most students feel comfortable surrounded by their peers, 62% prefer *studying with their friends* and 83% say they *interact easily with their colleagues in class*. A substantial number of students confirm that they have both the confidence and ability to learn a language successfully; 80% agree with the statement: *I have the ability to learn a language successfully*, while only 9% disagree. Similarly, 76% agree with: *I am confident I can learn a language successfully*, but 12% disagree. In addition, only a minority of the sample state that they have no confidence (12%), no ability (9%), or no willingness (7%) to *plan their language learning*. If learners are ready for autonomy they should be able to plan their language learning. Similarly, a small number confirm that they have neither the confidence (9%), nor the ability (9%), nor the willingness (8%) to *set their own language learning goals*. It may be safe to argue here that confidence, along with ability and willingness, may be a key determinant for being an autonomous learner.

Finding ways of practising and learning English can help learners become autonomous. Interestingly, 71% are confident about deciding for themselves what,

how, and when they want to learn; but only 58% are confident about finding their own ways of practising English and 67% are able to find their own ways of practising English, while 61% of students agree to the statement: I am willing to find my own ways of practising language. Moreover, 74% are confident about finding the best ways to learn about reading and writing study skills by themselves.

Although these results seem to contradict the results regarding the students' preference of face-to-face learning rather than self-study books and on-line learning, these sample students may not have gone through the experience of studying language using book style packages or on-line learning or had an unpleasant experience with the implementation of such modes. In other words, they may be unaware of different study modes or fear to depart from what they are used to during school for the sake of experimenting with new modes. Nonetheless, it is promising that their responses imply that they have confidence, ability and willingness which are key elements to become autonomous. It may be concluded from the results that those students are autonomous to a certain extent.

Wenden (1998) claims that planning language learning, as a meta-cognitive strategy, is crucial for becoming autonomous. Students were hence asked to respond to the following statements as adopted from Youssef's (2006) study:

- I have the ability to set my own language learning goals
- I am confident about setting my own language learning goals
- I am willing to set my own language learning goals
- I have the ability to plan my language learning
- I am confident about planning my language learning
- I am willing to plan my language learning if I get help

More than three quarters of the sample agree to the above statements. It may be reasonable to argue that having the confidence, ability and willingness to plan their learning goals render those students autonomous to a certain degree. Sinclair (2010) points out that learners would manifest autonomy in various degrees across a continuum; some may be willing to be autonomous while others may not like to be so.

The underlying meta-cognitive strategies that should also be examined when questioning learners' readiness for autonomy include *revision*, *evaluation*, and *feedback* on their learning progress. Unexpectedly, only 56% are confident about *revising their work by themselves*, and 64% have the ability and 71% have the willingness to do so. When revising their work, around 63% of the students express their ability and 56% their willingness to *identify their strengths and weaknesses* as language learners, whereas about one quarter indicates that they have no ability and one third has no willingness to do so. Furthermore, 53% of the students believe that they have the ability to *evaluate their work*, yet 71% agree that that their *own feedback on their language learning helps them the most*. Additionally, 60% of the sample students express their ability, 73% their willingness and 49% their confidence to *measure their own language learning progress*, but 27% have no ability, 24% have no willingness and 44% no confidence to measure their progress.

Nonetheless, 56% of students agree that *having their work evaluated by other classmates is helpful*, while 33% believe the opposite. Three quarters of the sample believe in the



statement: *Teacher's feedback on my reading and writing skills helps me most* while only 7% disagree. It should also be noted that 42% fear the teacher's evaluation in comparison to 30% who fear their classmates' evaluation, whereas 34% do not fear the teachers' feedback and more than 50% do not fear their peers' feedback. Such results might be rationalised by assuming that students do not fear their classmates' evaluation or feedback as they regard them of equal status and knowledge. This in turn may explain the reason for considering their peers' feedback as less valuable than the teacher's feedback. Such respect and value given to the teachers' feedback may be based on the students' misconceptions that the teacher is the sole source of knowledge, yet they fear such feedback when it becomes evaluative. Furthermore, it may be possible that some students depend on their teacher for feedback more than on their classmates or on their own feedback. This interpretation may be supported by the majority of students' responses who state that they have the confidence, ability, and willingness to ask for help when needed.

Regarding students' beliefs of *the role of the teacher in a language class*, the majority of students agreed on the significance of the teacher's role. Students believe that teachers should help them learn effectively (85%); identify their weaknesses (76%); offer them help (86%); create opportunities for them to practice language (80%); give them regular tests (80%); know how well they are learning (80%); tell them what progress they are making (75%); decide how long they spend on language activities (70%); explain why they are doing an activity (70%); set their learning goals (70%); and tell them what to do (61%). These results show that students still think that they cannot successfully learn a language without the teacher's guidance. It is worthwhile noting that the students' responses slightly contradict their responses on setting their own goals and planning their own ways of learning. However, this may be explained by their willingness to become autonomous and their need to be encouraged to do so. Teachers have an essential role in promoting autonomous learning.

Generally speaking, students assign many different roles to the teacher, namely a mentor; guide; knowledge transmitter; evaluator; leader; reformer; and facilitator, to name but a few. Such interchangeable roles may be the result of the students' recognition that they are no longer school students and that they want to become less dependent on their teachers during college time to have control over the time they spend on activities, setting their own goals and doing what they want to do, not what their teacher wants them to do. Yet, they are still torn by their inherited and culturally bound beliefs that the teacher should be at the centre of their learning and that the teacher is capable enough to plan their learning goals and road map the miraculous pathways that would lead them to their successful learning.

## 5. Conclusion

There are some limitations to the present study. Students, who selected the *undecided* category for their responses, might have done so out of laziness or boredom because the 90-item questionnaire was long for them. In addition, the researcher could not guarantee that the instructors who administered the questionnaire had, as asked, properly pointed out to the students the differences between having the confidence, ability or willingness to carry out a task. Some students could have been confused and may not have noticed such differences in meaning and their importance for the present research. Finally, this study is not comprehensive, and therefore, cannot yield generalizations about ESP learners in other teaching/learning contexts or in other

disciplines and cultures. In fact, a similar study was conducted a year earlier on students from a different discipline yet in the same educational setting and yielded some different findings (Hozayen, 2009). Further research is highly recommended on learners with different mother tongues, from different disciplines, with different socio-economic and educational backgrounds as well as different cultural contexts.

The present study advocates raising the learners' awareness of the cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies relevant to the language learning process. This could be done by getting learners to reflect on how they learn. Reflection is a critical activity exploring one's personal experiences and beliefs over a period of time in order to gain insights on how one develops one's learning in a certain area (Boud, Keough & Walker, 1985 cited in Benson, 2001). Reflection makes learners more active and critical in the sense that they learn to analyse their learning strategies and, thus, start making their own learning decisions about whether to improve them and in which way. Generally, learners may not be expected to reflect on their own learning processes, i.e. analyse and evaluate their language learning experience. Retrospective tasks, such as structured or semi-structured questionnaires, self reports, diaries and evaluation sheets are useful ways to do so. In a similar way, the present researcher has helped students reflect on their own learning and in particular the language learning process.

The present study shows that more than two thirds of the participants manifest some degrees of language learning autonomy. However, more follow up on this group's language learning progress might reveal more stimulating and insightful findings. Obviously, the key elements underlying learners' autonomy are ability, which entails knowledge and skills, and willingness, which embraces confidence and motivation. Such elements empower learners to take full responsibility and control over their own learning. Therefore, learners should be geared toward being more critical, independent and active during the learning process. Their teachers should also encourage them to take full advantage of the surrounding learning resources. More importantly, learners need support to improve their learning, become engaged in the learning process, experiment with and reflect on their learning and to be free to have their personal learning experience (Murray, 2009). This study concludes that successful learning may be mainly dependent on giving the learners a chance to display the characteristics of autonomous learning, provided that all necessary learning facilities and resources are available. Nunan has clearly showed that:

autonomous learners are able to self-determine the overall direction of their learning, become actively involved in the management of the learning process, (and) exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities (Nunan, 2000, p. 10)

Finally, fostering autonomy in language learning among students in the Arab Academy has become inevitable in order to resolve some of the persisting problems. A major recurring problem is the time and space constraints caused by the students' tight timetables and very little time allotted to the ESP classes, which compels students to practise more of their language outside the classroom. Therefore, the teaching materials and resources should also be developed and adjusted to foster such an autonomous *approach* to language learning (Nunan, 1997). In short, teachers must always encourage their students to transfer their autonomous language learning

strategies to their learning in general and thus empowering them to become life-long knowledgeable, creative and inquisitive learners.

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# Exploration of How Students Perceive Autonomous Learning in an EFL Context

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## Abstract

For students accustomed to a traditional approach to language learning the notion of learner autonomy, taking responsibility for and control of the learning process, is unfamiliar. This study investigates how freshmen students from different departments of a Turkish university perceive the concept of responsibility within an EFL context. It explores what students deem to be their own responsibilities and the teacher's responsibilities. It also uncovers the activities students engage in both inside and outside the classroom within the framework of their perceived responsibilities. The study used a questionnaire with 210 participants and interviews with a random selection of 24 of those participants. The findings reveal that the educational system in Turkey needs to take a huge leap towards training learners to become more autonomous from the first day of education.

**Key words:** learner autonomy, EFL, perceptions, Turkish tertiary students

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## 1. Introduction

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.  
Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.  
(Chinese Proverb)

Language learning is not an easy process; it requires time and effort. The concept of autonomy adds a meaningful dimension to that process since it gives students responsibility for their own learning, which renders them more active during the process. Unfortunately, there was an inclination towards teacher-centred learning, and the students were considered as passive receivers of information. However, with the introduction of the notion of learner autonomy, students have grasped more rights independent of the teacher, and they have begun to take an active participatory role in their own learning.

## 1.1 Autonomous language learning

Autonomous learning requires the skill of taking responsibility and control of the learning process (Holec, 1981). Responsible learners “accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning, and behave accordingly” (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 3). In fact, autonomy constitutes the core of learning. Longworth believes ownership of learning belongs with the learner not the teacher, “a 180-degree shift of emphasis and power from provider to receiver” (Longworth, 2003, p. 12). Autonomy enables students to be more sophisticated and equipped as learner, thus, “teachers who want to empower students to make decisions and resolve their own problems will give students opportunities to think, act and take responsibility” (Charles, 1999, p. 221). Learning is closely associated with autonomy. As Little (Little, 2007, p. 14) notes, “the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are mutually supporting and fully integrated with each other”. The development of autonomy in learners is a process for which Scharle & Szabó (2000, p. 9) propose three stages:

- Raising awareness
- Changing attitudes
- Transferring roles

Liu (2005, p. 51) suggests positive interdependence as an additional stage to follow the above. Whatever the stages, it is clear that autonomous learning demands a role change of both teachers and students.

Teachers begin to share responsibility for learning with the students in autonomous learning contexts. “Teachers serve as facilitators and guides rather than directors and moulders of [...] learning” (Santrock, 2006, p. 315). As Slavin notes, in student-centred classrooms, teachers become “*‘the guide on the side’* instead of *‘the sage on the stage’* helping students to discover their own meaning instead of lecturing and controlling all classroom activities” (Slavin, 1997, p. 270). Gaining a broader outlook and respecting students as individuals are vital steps in enabling learner autonomy to flourish in the context of language learning. Hence, teachers should be open to constructing a good relationship with students and also quitting the “know-it-all-role” as Nakamura (2000) suggests. Attitudes regarding teacher-roles are also changing (Table 1).

**Table 1: Changing Attitudes (after Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 6)**

Traditional attitudes	Student-centred attitudes
I have all the information	The syllabus, the exam and the information are here for us to share
It is my job to transmit knowledge to you	I am not the fount of all knowledge
I am responsible for your learning	You are responsible for your learning
It is my job to make sure that you work	I am here to facilitate your learning by providing resources and support
As the adult and professional, I have the expertise to make the right decisions for your learning	I trust that you want to learn and will take responsibility for your own learning

An autonomy-supportive learning climate does not allow students to be passive receivers of information and it stimulates them to become critical thinkers. The more autonomous and active they are, the more independent they become. As Bruner emphasizes, students *learn to learn* in autonomy-prone contexts (cited in Williams & Burden, 1997). Intellectual responsibility induces active thinking and eliminates the narrow borders of passive thinking which prepares students for life.

## 2. Methodology

This study used a mixed method design in which quantitative questionnaire data provided a basis for a qualitative interview.

### 2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 210 university freshmen students studying in the faculties of Engineering; Economics and Administrative Sciences; and Arts and Science. These students were accustomed to traditional teacher-centred language education and had been exposed to the conventional university entrance examination. As freshmen students they were unaccustomed to autonomous learning. Student groups were selected through purposive sampling but individual participants within each group were chosen via random sampling. The study did not take the gender, age and socio-economic status of the participants into account.

### 2.2 Data collection instruments

A questionnaire and a series of subsequent interviews were used. The questionnaire results were subjected to a statistical analysis. Interviews were semi-structured to follow-up on key points arising from an analysis of the questionnaire data.

The questionnaire was adapted from Egel's (2003) *Autonomy Learner Questionnaire* (ALQ). It consisted of 47 items. The items are divided into nine categories, each reflecting different aspect of autonomous learning:

- Readiness for self-direction
- Independent work in language learning
- Importance of class/teacher
- Role of teacher/explanation/supervision
- Language learning activities
- Selection of content
- Objectives/evaluation
- Assessment/motivation
- Other cultures

This instrument used a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents responded to statements by choosing one of five responses: True (5), Mostly true (4), Sometimes true (3), Rarely true (2) and Never true (1).

Interviews were conducted with 24 randomly selected students. A semi-structured interview was used to allow for individual responses and enable the students to express their feelings and opinions freely. The questions were in parallel with the categories in the questionnaire. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed in order not to miss any important points.

### 2.3 Data analysis

The results of the questionnaire were analysed using the SPSS statistical package. The interview data were numerically coded, recorded and interpreted. The qualitative data gathered through the interview were subjected to content analysis. Frequencies of occurrence of ideas were counted and recurring responses of different participants were noted.

## 3. Findings

Responses to questionnaire items have been grouped into relevant topics. Questionnaire and interview data are presented in parallel to render the results more understandable, concise and coherent.

A majority of the students indicate readiness for self-direction in language learning (Table 2). More than half of them appear to take responsibility for their learning. Likewise, a majority claim they will continue learning English in the future without a teacher. They seem to show a high level of tenacity while learning. Interview results also support this fact with a majority of students reporting they do not give up easily in case of a difficulty in learning, for example:

I do not give up easily if I do not learn something in English. I ask my friends and teacher.

**Table 2: Readiness for Self-direction**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
1	Relation between new and former knowledge	38.1	34.3	19.5	3.8	3.8
3	Careful attention to someone talking English	29	28.1	26.7	11.4	4.3
4	English among friends & family	19.5	18.6	32.9	14.3	14.3
16	Continue learning English without teacher in future	54.8	19.5	15.2	6.7	3.8
28	Responsibility for learning	37.1	18.6	26.7	14.3	2.9
32	Worry about compensating deficiencies	32.4	28.6	19.5	11	7.6
33	Self-observation for progress	29.5	31	22.9	10	6.2
35	Insistence/no give-up	45.2	21.4	21	9	3.3
44	Self-study apart from homework	15.2	17.1	33.8	24.3	9.5

However, fewer students reported that they study on their own apart from homework. As evidence of using English outside the classroom most students



sometimes speak the target language among family and friends. Interview responses uncover that they use English when talking on MSN/Facebook (7), among friends (7), using dictionaries (6), watching films (3), playing games (2), listening to songs (2), using books/audiobooks (2) and joining activities related to English (2). Only three students revealed that they do nothing to use English outside the classroom.

The data also shows interesting responses about freshmen students' independent work habits in language learning (Table 3). More than one third of the students do not use English resources willingly although most of them seem to be willing to read basic books. Roughly two thirds of the students like activities they can learn on their own, which also hints at their tendency towards learner autonomy. Even though more than a quarter of the students remarked that they can sometimes study alone, about 37% of them hold a belief in their ability for individual study. However, approximately 45% of the students are of the opinion that they rarely or never learn better when studying alone. Interview results supported the questionnaire findings. Out of the 24 interviewees, 11 answered that they do something about English even if the teacher does not give homework. Among the activities they do are: reading; learning new words; watching movies; online exercises before exams and playing computer games (they remarked that they come across English words in computer games and need to learn those words to play the games). However, slightly more than half of the students do not do anything without being given an assignment. Those doing nothing complained about having no time, for example:

It is better if teacher gives homework. No-homework causes procrastination.  
Then, I do not study because nothing stimulates me,

**Table 3: Independent Work in Language Learning**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
2	Use English resources willingly	19	17.6	28.1	22.4	19.2
5	Read basic English books	25.2	21.4	21.9	15.2	15.7
6	Like activities I can learn on my own	40	26.2	18.1	9.5	5.7
7	Ability to learn alone	15.2	21.9	27.6	18.1	16.7
10	Like trying new things	28.1	27.1	21.4	17.6	4.8
37	Learn better when studying alone	9.5	13.3	31.9	21.4	22.9

In commenting on the importance of the teacher, more than half of the students fear not being able to learn English if the teacher does not explain (Table 4). By the same token, a majority of the students feel a sense of security when the teacher is beside them. Almost half the students (45%) said they can learn English only with the help of the teacher. In addition, more than half of the students believe the necessity of teacher guidance (67%). However, 62% of students rarely or never study English

only for homework, which implies they conduct self-study apart from homework. This somewhat constitutes contradicts their earlier perceptions of autonomy. Similarly, 55% of students claim they do not only complete the tasks to be graded by the teacher although 24% sometimes only do the tasks to be graded. During the interviews more than two thirds of the students stated that they cannot learn English without a teacher, which highlights their reliance on the teacher. They said things like:

I cannot learn without teacher. Who will I ask if I do not learn?

**Table 4: Importance of Class/Teacher**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
8	Fear of not being able to learn English if teacher does not tell	32.4	19	19	13.3	16.2
11	Feel safe when teacher is beside me	39.5	22.9	23.8	10.5	2.9
12	Learn English only with the help of teacher	23.3	21.4	17.6	18.6	18.6
13	Necessity of teacher guidance	40	27.6	17.6	10	4.3
18	Learn grammar on my own/ without teacher	5.7	13.3	25.7	21	33.8
19	Use personal methods to learn vocabulary	25.2	27.6	25.7	12.9	7.6
38	Study English only for homework	8.6	8.6	20	29	32.9
43	Complete only the tasks to be graded by teacher	9.5	10	23.8	26.2	28.6

Students had clear perceptions about the role of teacher and explanation (Table 5). As discussed earlier it is clear most of the students dislike learning English on their own (Table 4). Likewise, a number of students incline to depend on the teacher in learning vocabulary and details of language, which shows that students assign these responsibilities to the teacher. However, there is an equal distribution among the responses about the inability to gain grammatical knowledge themselves. During interviews they also shared responsibility for learning between students and teacher (see Table 6 for a summary).

In the interviews, 22 respondents noted students are responsible for their learning, for example:

I am responsible for my learning. Teacher’s responsibility is to motivate us. Teacher is just a guide. Teacher should leave some doors open, and students should fill those gaps.

This implies that freshmen students are aware they need to take an active role in their learning. Nevertheless, they display dependence on their teacher to some extent and

they do not know how to apply autonomy in their learning which may be because that they have been accustomed to conventional teaching.

**Table 5: The Role of The Teacher/Explanation/Supervision**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
9	Dislike learning English on my own	26.2	19.5	15.7	18.1	20.5
14	Want teacher to repeat grammatical rules	48.1	24.3	17.6	6.7	3.3
15	Happy when teacher explains every detail of English	59.5	23.8	6.7	4.8	4.8
21	Inability to learn grammar on my own	16.2	22.4	25.2	21	14.8
22	Want teacher to provide vocabulary	33.3	23.3	19.5	15.2	8.6

**Table 6: Responsibilities of Teachers/Students Expressed During Interviews**

Responsibilities/Duties of Teacher	Responsibilities/Duties of Student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving lecture (21)</li> <li>• Making students love English (4)</li> <li>• Motivating students (4)</li> <li>• Being facilitator (2)</li> <li>• Providing guidance (7)</li> <li>• Coming lesson on time (1)</li> <li>• Making repetitions (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding/studying/striving and making effort to learn (18)</li> <li>• Listening to lesson(1)</li> <li>• Practising (writing/translating/writing on MSN/watching films)</li> <li>• Making preparations for lesson beforehand (1)</li> <li>• Consulting to other teachers(1)</li> </ul>

The questionnaire responses about language learning activities (Table 7) indicate that projects and group work are popular at least some of the time for the majority of students and equally most of them find it useful to work with friends rather than alone. It is also notable that many students want to use cassettes and CDs outside the classroom, which may enhance their autonomous learning habits.

Interview findings support these results. More than two thirds of the freshmen interviewed prefer group work because it is more enjoyable and they can learn from each other although a smaller but significant number said they like individual work since their learning styles and pace of learning may be different from that of their classmates.

**Table 7: Language Learning Activities**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
17	Like projects/group works	24.8	19	25.7	17.6	11.9
23	Want to use cassette/CDs outside class	43.3	21.4	20.5	7.1	7.6
24	Prefer reading and listening outside classroom	21	19.5	31.9	16.7	10.5
39	Useful to work with friends rather than work alone	24.8	19.5	20.5	18.1	17.1

The respondents also suggested the kinds of activities they prefer or would like to see in the classroom (Table 8). It is clear from the list that students would rather see variety in activities which help improve their different language skills.

**Table 8: Preferred Activities**

Activities respondents prefer or would like to see in classroom			
Role-play (10)	Songs (3)	Slides (2)	Reading (2)
Speaking (8)	Stories (3)	Listening (2)	Presentations (2)
Games (5)	Films/theatres (3)	Writing (2)	Chat (2)
			Crosswords (1)

When asked in the questionnaire about participation in the decision-making process (Table 9) most students expressed a desire to share responsibility at least some of the time for what will be done in English lessons. However, they seemed less inclined to decide the content of lesson. Interviews elicited four main perceptions regarding the selection of the content. Nine students asserted that the teacher should decide on the content of the lesson because s/he knows better than them. Eight students took a somewhat more autonomous attitude towards the issue and suggested that the teacher should decide on the content of lesson but students should be consulted about the proceeding of the lesson. Four students preferred to select content themselves so they can learn what they want or need, which results in effective learning. Three students want to be involved in decision-making but feel they do not have enough knowledge about English, which means they view lack of English as a barrier for content selection, for example:

The teacher should decide on content because s/he knows the steps better than me. However, if I knew English at a sufficient level, I would want to decide together because collaboration with the teacher will result in effective learning.

**Table 9: Selection of Content**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
26	Want to share responsibility for what will be done in lesson	25.7	28.1	31	10	5.2
29	Want to decide the content of lesson	9	10	21	29	31

More than half of the students deem their friends better than themselves and strive to reach their level (Table 10). However, the majority of the students hold the belief that they will reach a good level of English despite their negative academic self-awareness. In interviews all participants expressed a desire to improve their English and that they will try to find ways to do it.

**Table 10: Objectives/Evaluation**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
31	Think that my friends are better than me and strive to reach them	35.2	18.6	17.1	12.9	15.7
34	Believe that I will reach a good level of English	47.1	24.3	17.6	6.7	3.3

Responses to items about the relationship between assessment and motivation (Table 11) suggest that most students do not study only for grades. Interview responses from about two-thirds of the respondents also reflected the attitude of continuing to study even after receiving a good score from an exam. In the interviews respondents also gave the motives for learning English shown in Table 12.

**Table 11: The Relationship Between Assessment and Motivation**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
30	Do not study topics when I get high mark	8.1	7.6	19	22.9	41.9
36	Study English when there is exam	15.2	14.8	31	19	19.5
40	Do exercises only when teacher gives grades	11	11.4	21.4	29	27.1

Responses to items about students' interest in the culture of the target language (Table 13) show that the participants were not very inclined to examine the culture of their target language. Conversely they do show an interest in asking people who have lived abroad about the lifestyle there. This attitude also emerged in the interviews which revealed that most students listen attentively if someone is describing the target language culture.

**Table 12: Preferred Activities**

Learning English is very nice/I study to "learn" (5)
English is a universal language (8)
I study for occupational purposes (6)
I study to go to abroad (3)
I want to learn in order to speak to a foreign person (5)
I study for grades (4)
I will be more sophisticated (3)
I love English (2)

**Table 13: Other Cultures**

		Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True	Never true
	ITEMS	%	%	%	%	%
45	Search about culture of TL	12.4	5.7	22.9	29	29
47	Ask people who lived abroad about the lifestyle there	30.5	21	21	15.2	12.4

## 4. Discussion

Analyses of the data indicate that freshmen students at university have a positive perception about learner autonomy though they have been accustomed to conventional language teaching. Students have different perceptions concerning the nine dimensions of autonomy. In terms of readiness for self-direction freshmen seem to have persistence during learning although they are not inclined to study much apart from assignments. They need homework to study systematically, and instead of individual study they prefer various interactional activities such as MSN/ Facebook, using English among friends, using dictionaries, watching movies, playing games, listening to songs and using books/audiobooks. They are in favour of group work. Moreover, they place a high value on guidance and the presence of a teacher during the learning process. They show a dependency on the teacher while learning English. Therefore, they assign different roles to teachers such as giving lectures, motivating students, facilitating the process and providing guidance. Though they seem to be dependent learners, they are aware that students should be responsible for their own learning; thus, they specified their roles as studying, exerting an effort to learn,

practising and consulting the teacher. In addition, freshmen students appear to be willing to share responsibility in decision-making processes for classroom procedures; however, they deem themselves insufficiently knowledgeable for selection of lesson content. With respect to self-evaluation, they regard their friends as better at English; even so, they are positive about improving. What is more, they do not study only for the sake of grades; they have both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations such as communication, job requirements, universal language and a love of English. Though they would like to go abroad and speak to foreigners, they appear not to seek information about the culture of their target language. However, they claim to pay close attention to those talking about that culture.

## 5. Conclusion

Both questionnaire and interview results indicate that university students have some awareness about learner autonomy; however, they do not know how to apply it. It may be because they have been accustomed to conventional teaching and autonomy is a new concept for them. They may not yet have had time to formalise their perceptions about autonomous learning. Students believe they are responsible for their learning but do not put time and effort into assuming that responsibility. Moreover, they believe that a teacher's primary role is to lecture and provide guidance. However, their lack of English knowledge prevents them from becoming autonomous learners. With an increase in hours of English classes and starting with simple activities, students may realize that autonomy is not something to be feared or something very challenging. On the contrary it may enhance their motivation and self-confidence.

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## Autonomous Language Learning: Turkish tertiary students' behaviours

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### Abstract

The purpose of the study reported here was to investigate autonomous English language learning activities among the students in an English preparatory programme at Zirve University in Turkey. The study investigated whether these activities show significant differences according to the motivation level, proficiency level or gender of the students. The data were collected through the *Learner Autonomy Questionnaire* originally developed by Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002). The questionnaire was completed by 218 students and 30 teachers. The results revealed that: the majority of participants engaged in autonomous learning activities inside and outside the classroom; there is no significant difference between the autonomous learning activities of men and women; however, women engaged in more autonomous activities than men; students with high proficiency in English engaged much more in autonomous learning activities; students who were motivated and highly motivated participated frequently in autonomous learning activities.

**Key words:** autonomous learning activities, ELT, motivation, proficiency, language learning, Turkish tertiary students

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### 1. Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy first made its appearance in the field of language teaching with Holec (Benson, 2001) who defined learner autonomy as:

The capacity to take charge of ones' own learning [which is] ...to have and to hold the responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, including, but not necessarily limited to, determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981, p. 3)

Learner autonomy involves learners in decision-making processes regarding their own learning (Littlejohn, 1997), giving students an opportunity to play a considerable role in setting the learning goals, organizing the learning process, and fulfilling those



goals (Little, 1991). Learner autonomy also provides learners with an opportunity to find their own way of learning and to learn at their own pace (Camilleri, 1999). Involvement in planning learning increases their motivation and awareness (Little, 2003; McCarthy, 1998).

Cotterall (1995) suggests learner autonomy has gained in importance and popularity for reasons which are: philosophical, pedagogical and practical. Philosophically, learners have the right to make choices about their own learning. Helping learners to learning how to make their own choices will prepare them for a changing future. Pedagogically, learning is more effective when learners are involved in decisions about the learning process. Practically, learners feel more secure when they participate in the decision-making process.

One area of focus in the literature on learner autonomy is its relationship with language proficiency and motivation (see for example, Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Risemberg & Zimmerman, 1992). Deng found that “student’s English proficiency was significantly and positively related to their learner autonomy” (2007, p. 15). Garcia & Pintrich found that autonomy is “more closely related to motivational factors than to performance” (1996, p. 477). Wachob similarly believes that “creating learner autonomy within the individual relies heavily on individual self-motivation” (2006, p. 96). Dickinson believes that both successful learning and the enhancement of motivation are “conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning, being able to control their own learning and perceiving that their learning successes or failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control” (1995, p. 174).

The purpose of this study is to explore students’ autonomous behaviours while studying English in the preparatory programme of Zirve University and poses the following research questions:

1. What autonomous activities are students engaged in inside and outside the classroom?
2. Do autonomous activities differ according to students’ motivation level?
3. Do autonomous activities differ according to students’ proficiency level?
4. Do autonomous activities differ according to students’ gender?

## 2. Methodology

This section describes the participants and the data collection instrument, collection procedure and method of analysis.

### 2.1 Participants

The participants were 97 female students (44.5% of the study group) and 121 male students (55.5% of the study group) studying in the English Language Programme of the Preparatory School at Zirve University in Turkey. The majority of participants were in the lower half of the proficiency tracks within the Preparatory School (Table 1a). Most of the participants self-rated themselves as motivated or highly motivated (Table 1b) for learning English.

A modified form of the questionnaire was also administered to 30 teachers of English to compare students' and teachers perceptions of the use of autonomous activities.

**Table 1a: Participants' Proficiency Level**

Proficiency level	N	%
Track 1	49	22.5
Track 2	122	56.0
Track 3	33	15.1
Track 4	14	6.4
Total	218	100.0

**Table 1b: Participants' Self-rated Level of Motivation**

Level	N	%
Highly motivated	67	30.7
Motivated	117	53.7
Unmotivated	24	11.0
Highly unmotivated	10	4.6
Total	218	100.0

## 2.2 Instrument and data gathering

The data collection instrument consisted of two parts. The first part sought information about the subjects' personal characteristics, including gender and self-rated motivation levels; the second part asked about their autonomous learning activities both inside and outside classroom. This instrument was adapted from the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire developed by Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002) and based on earlier work by Deci and Ryan (1985). Üstünoğlu (2009) also used this questionnaire in her study. She modified some parts of it and it is her modified version that was used in the present study. The whole instrument was translated into Turkish, to prevent language comprehension difficulties causing misunderstandings of items and thus skewing the data. The questionnaire was first piloted by the researcher with 60 students after which participants were invited to comment on ambiguous items as a measure of content validity.

The finalised questionnaire contained 22 items relating to autonomous learning activities and invited responses on a 5-point Likert scale (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often and Always). The questionnaire was administered to 225 students in the third of five terms of the academic year during a regular class period. Students took approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Seven incorrectly completed responses were excluded from analysis, leaving a total of 218 useable surveys.

In order to test the reliability of the students' view on the "Learner Autonomy Questionnaire" as a whole, the Cronbach Alpha Coefficients were calculated. The "Students' View on Learner Autonomy Questionnaire" exhibited a high degree of reliability (" $\alpha$  .863") therefore we place considerable confidence in it.

## 2.3 Data analysis procedures

Means, standard deviations and frequencies of responses in relation to the variables of gender, motivation and proficiency were calculated. Findings relating to gender were analysed using a T-test to compare male and female average responses, and ANOVA was used in relation to differences in motivation and proficiency levels. All data analysis was conducted using SPSS17.0.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Autonomous activities inside and outside the classroom

Among a relatively wide range of potential autonomous activities (Table 2), all of which were engaged in by at least some of the students, the most popular (i.e. those which were engaged in always or often) are:

- Activating prior knowledge while studying (item 16) - 72%
- Undertook group studies in English lessons (item 11) - 69%
- Took notes while studying (item 20) - 65%
- Noted new words and their meaning (item 2) - 64%
- Listened to English songs (item 7) - 61%
- Used resources while studying (item 21) - 60%

The least popular activities which participants said they rarely or never do are:

- Read newspapers in English (item 3) - 77%
- Read books or magazines in English (item 5) - 60%
- Do grammar exercises (item 10) - 38%
- Attend the language lab for self-study (item 12) - 46%
- Summarized their studies while studying (item 19) - 38%
- Made suggestions to the teacher (item 14) - 49%

**Table 2: Students' Perceptions of the Frequency of Using Autonomous Activities**

	Activities Undertaken	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
		%	%	%	%	%
1	Assignments which are not compulsory	9.6	21.6	32.6	28.4	7.8
2	Noted down new words and their meanings	25.7	38.1	28.9	6.9	0.5
3	Read newspapers in English	0.9	3.7	18.8	47.2	29.4
4	Visited teacher about work	8.7	22.9	37.2	25.2	6.0
5	Read books or magazines in English	3.7	8.7	28.0	37.6	22.0
6	Watched English TV programmes	13.8	25.2	26.6	23.9	10.6
7	Listened to English songs	30.7	30.3	23.9	12.8	2.3
8	Talked to foreigners in English	12.4	22.5	36.2	24.3	4.6
9	Practiced using English with friends	5.0	17.9	45.0	27.5	4.6
10	Grammar exercises	10.6	22.9	28.4	24.8	13.3
11	Group studies in English lessons	27.5	41.7	15.1	12.4	3.2

12	Attended the language lab for self-study	10.6	18.8	25.2	23.9	21.6
13	Asked the teacher questions when did not understand	27.1	31.7	29.8	9.6	1.8
14	Made suggestions to the teacher	10.1	10.6	30.7	31.2	17.4
15	Planned lesson/study	11.5	25.2	31.7	22.0	9.6
16	Activated prior knowledge while studying	33.5	38.5	19.7	5.5	2.8
17	Made inferences about the lesson	11.5	34.9	32.6	15.1	6.0
18	Did classifications while studying	11.0	32.4	32.1	23.9	9.6
19	Summarised own studies while studying	9.6	26.1	26.6	22.9	14.7
20	Took notes while studying	31.2	33.5	21.6	10.1	3.7
21	Used resources while studying	30.7	28.9	21.1	13.3	6.0
22	Worked cooperatively with friends	12.4	23.9	33.9	23.4	6.4

Using a modified version of the same questionnaire, teachers were asked how often they think their students used autonomous activities (Table 3). This was used as a way of confirming students' perceptions. The most common or frequent autonomous activities the teachers thought students engaged in were (an asterisk\* denotes items which also appeared on students' list of most common activities):

- Asked the teacher questions (item 13) - 77%
- Undertook group studies in English lessons (item 11)\* - 67%
- Done grammar exercises (item 10) - 63%
- Listened to English songs (item 7)\* - 47%
- Noted new words and their meaning (item 2)\* - 40%
- Talked to foreigners in English (item 8) - 30%

**Table 3: Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomous Activities Used by their Students**

Activities undertaken:		Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
		%	%	%	%	%
1	Assignments which are not compulsory	10.0	3.3	20.0	50.0	16.7
2	Noted down new words and their meanings	6.7	33.3	30.0	30.0	-
3	Read newspapers in English	-	-	3.3	33.3	63.3
4	Visited teacher about work	-	6.7	66.7	26.7	-
5	Read books or magazines in English	-	-	3.3	60.0	36.7

6	Watched English TV programmes	10.0	3.3	40	40	6.7
7	Listened to English songs	13.3	33.3	43.3	6.7	3.3
8	Talked to foreigners in English	10.0	20.0	20.0	43.3	6.7
9	Practiced using English with friends	-	13.3	23.3	33.3	30.0
10	Grammar exercises	6.7	56.7	26.7	10.0	-
11	Group studies in English lessons	10.0	56.7	20.0	6.7	6.7
12	Attended the language lab for self-study	10	6.7	23.3	20.0	40.0
13	Asked the teacher questions when did not understand	20.0	56.7	23.3	-	-
14	Made suggestions to the teacher	6.7	10.0	36.7	43.3	3.3
15	Planned lesson/study	10.0	3.3	26.7	36.78	23.3
16	Activated prior knowledge while studying	10.0	13.3	43.3	26.7	6.7
17	Made inferences about the lesson	10.0	3.3	30.0	36.7	20.0
18	Did classifications while studying	-	-	30.0	33.3	36.7
19	Summarised own studies while studying	10.0	6.7	33.3	20	30.0
20	Took notes while studying	20.0	36.7	23.3	10.0	10.0
21	Used resources while studying	10.0	20.0	40.0	26.7	3.3
22	Worked cooperatively with friends	3.3	36.7	43.3	16.7	-

### 3. 2 Autonomous activities and motivation level

The results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicate a significant difference in the score of autonomous activities  $F=3.282$ ,  $p=.00$ ,  $\eta^2= .3$  in terms of motivational level as reported by the students (Table 4). The significant effects were further investigated with pairwise comparisons by using Scheffe correction.

**Table 4: Analysis of Variance of Motivation Level**

Motivation Level	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	9.846	3	3.282	12.305	0.00
Within Groups	57.080	214	.267		
Total	66.926	217			

A Scheffe post hoc analysis (Table 5) also indicates that motivation level differs significantly between groups in terms of autonomous activities. The autonomous activity score of the highly motivated group is significantly higher than those of the

little motivated and unmotivated groups. Motivated and highly motivated students said they often participate in activities related to autonomous learning.

**Table 5: A Scheffe Post Hoc Analysis for Motivation Level**

Motivation	N	Subset for alfa=0.05
No motivation	24	2.77
Little motivation	10	2.79
Average Motivation	117	3.13
High motivation	67	3.42

### 3.3 Autonomous activities and proficiency level

The results of ANOVA indicate a significant difference in the score of autonomous activities  $F=4.466$ ,  $p=.005$ ,  $\eta^2= 1.31$  in terms of proficiency level (Table 6).

**Table 6: Analysis of Variance of English Proficiency Level**

Proficiency Level	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.943	3	1.314	4.466	.005
Within Groups	62.983	214	.294		
Total	66.926	217			

A Scheffe post hoc analysis also indicates that proficiency levels differ significantly between groups with higher and lower levels of autonomous activities. The score of the advanced level is significantly higher than the scores of intermediate, pre intermediate and elementary levels (Table 7).

**Table 7: A Scheffe Post Hoc Analysis for Proficiency Level**

Proficiency Tracks	n	Subset for alpha=0.05
1	49	3.10
3	33	3.12
2	122	3.14
4	14	3.67

Advanced level students clearly participate more in activities related to autonomous learning.

### 3.4 Autonomous activities and gender

Although female participants scored slightly higher than male participants on the number of autonomous activities engaged in (Table 8) with an average of 3.2 activities per female and 3.1 activities per male, the T-test shows this difference is not statistically significant ( $T=1.36$ ,  $P > .05$ ).

**Table 8: Distribution of Activities by Gender**

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Female	97	3.224	.49660	.05042
Male	121	3.121	.59638	.05422

## 4. Discussion

In this study the autonomous activity scores do not differ significantly according to gender, even though women reported doing slightly more autonomous learning activities than men.

Results show that the majority of participants perceive they do participate in autonomous learning activities both in the classroom and outside it at least some of the time. The most common autonomous activities students reported engaging in are: activating prior knowledge while studying, group studies, taking notes while studying, noting new words and their meaning, listening to English songs, using resources while studying.

The participants in this study seem to engage in autonomous activities “sometimes” rather than “often” or “always”. Students’ previous studying habits learned in high schools and the classroom activities carried out by previous teachers, particularly those with traditional teaching styles, may be a cause of this behaviour. As Utman (1997) says in his study, over-authoritarian behaviour by teachers may cause a reduction in learner autonomy.

Most of the participants perceive themselves as motivated and highly motivated. However, they seem unwilling to engage in activities out of the classroom such as reading newspapers in English, visiting their teachers to talk about their homework, or reading books and magazines in English. This behaviour may be related to whether the students have intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Students are likely to take more responsibility in contexts where they control outcomes (Dickinson, 1995; Fazey & Fazey, 2001). This study also found that students at an advanced proficiency level engage much more in autonomous activities than those at elementary or pre-intermediate levels.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which 218 preparatory level students in a Turkish university reported that they were engaged in a variety of autonomous activities while learning English in a university-based program. It also explored the relationship

between their self-reported levels of autonomous learning activity and both their English proficiency level and their self-assessed level of motivation.

The results of the study indicate that the students' English proficiency and motivation level are significantly and positively related to their autonomous activities. It is possible to say, based on the results, that students are more engaged in autonomous activities when their English proficiency and motivation levels are high. Despite this correlation between levels of proficiency/motivation and autonomous learning activity, it is not possible to determine whether this is a cause and effect relationship or coincidental. If, as is speculated here and in other places, there is a causal relationship it is currently not possible to determine which is the cause and which is the effect, and this is expected to be the focus of future research. In the meantime, on the understanding that the relationship is at least beneficial it is suggested that every opportunity should be taken to integrate learner autonomy into the curriculum.

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## **Part 4**

# **Teacher Education for Learner Autonomy**

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## **In-service Teacher Development for Facilitating Learner Autonomy in Curriculum-Based Self-Access Language Learning**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to identify the challenges in-service language teachers are facing when they are asked to teach on a course with a self-access language learning (SALL) component, and the support and training that they perceive necessary to help learners to maximize their SALL experience. There is a large body of literature discussing ways to build, reinforce and measure learner autonomy, and attempts have been made to integrate SALL into the curriculum with various levels of success. The success and failure of those curriculum-based SALL programmes were often attributed to learner motivation, learner training, learner strategies, peer influence and availability and quality of resources in self-access centres. Teachers' roles in curriculum-based SALL have not received as much attention as they deserve. Very often practising teachers with very little or even no experience or knowledge about SALL are asked to promote autonomous learning in their classes but training about SALL for those teachers is insufficient. This paper reports the findings of interviews with EAP instructors teaching on a course with a major SALL component in a university in Hong Kong. Recommendations on appropriate teacher development regarding the facilitation of SALL within the curriculum are offered.

**Key words:** in-service teacher development, SALL, learner autonomy, self-access facilitation

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### **1. Introduction**

This paper aims to identify challenges in-service language teachers are facing when they are called upon to teach on an undergraduate English-for-Academic-Purposes (EAP) course with a self-access language learning (SALL) component in the Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES) at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), and to look for the types of support and training they perceive necessary to help learners to maximize their SALL experience.

SALL is an approach to learning which requires learners to exercise a high level of control over their learning outside the classroom including “learning management, cognitive processes and learning content” (Benson, 2001, p. 50). Little (1990) stresses that autonomy, as exhibited in SALL, “is **not** something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is **not** another teaching method” (p. 7). Benson (2003) argues that “autonomy can be fostered, but not taught” (p. 290). Broady and Kenning (1996) express a similar idea that “learner autonomy cannot be taught in the traditional sense, but can only be ‘promoted’ ” (p. 9). Hafner and Young (2007, p. 105) point out that as such learning has often been referred to as “an educational philosophy” rather than “a teaching methodology”, it sometimes challenges teachers’ established beliefs about language and language learning, and their teaching practices that they believe would guarantee the success of their learners.

## 2. The Change of Teacher Roles

To assume the new roles of fostering and promoting autonomous learning teachers need to transition from transmission to interpretation teaching on a continuum of teacher roles as characterized by Wright (1987). Teachers have to commit to transforming themselves to adapt to the new roles and to acquiring the skills necessary for them to take up those roles. Voller (1997) has suggested three potential roles for teachers who intend to foster learner autonomy in the classroom, namely “facilitator”, “counsellor” and “resource”, and has identified the technical and psycho-social skills that teachers need to acquire to meet the challenges of the new roles in an “autonomous” classroom.

After adopting the new facilitating role in the classroom, teachers can expect to see a change in the power structure between them and students (Little, 1991). Little (1995, p. 178) describes the new relationship as “co-producers of classroom language lessons” in which “the teacher’s task is to bring learners to the point where they accept equal responsibility for this co-production... in terms of their readiness to undertake organizational initiative” by means of “complex and... protracted process of negotiation”. Although the whole burden of learning carried by teachers is shared among teachers and students in an ‘autonomous’ classroom, Dam (2003) argues that “it is largely the teacher’s responsibility to develop learner autonomy” (p. 135) and suggests that “learner autonomy develops... in the teacher’s own development and awareness as regards his or her role in the whole process” (p. 136).

## 3. In-Service Teacher Training Models

Teacher resistance resulting from uncertainty and a feeling of being “de-skilled” (Hafner & Young, 2007, p. 104) is often evident in teacher development as the process “involved in this change [of teacher roles] is one of re-evaluating practice, reconsidering established beliefs about language learning and language teaching, and acquiring new skills” (*ibid.*). To help in-service teachers get over the stage of questioning and uncertainty, and the frustration resulted from the unsatisfactory performance of learners in SALL, some in-service teacher training models have been proposed to get teachers involved in the planning, implementing and reflecting processes. Dam (2003, p. 143) develops a model for in-service teacher training to change teachers’ traditional teaching practice by guiding them through the “four steps towards responsibility for one’s own learning” including “experience”,

“awareness”, “influence on and participation in decision making” and “responsibility”. Another influential approach to in-service teacher development has been experimented with in Portugal by Vieira and her colleagues (see, for example, Vieira, 1999; Vieira & Moreira, 2008) toward a pedagogy for autonomy through reflective teacher education and action research.

Despite the presence of some useful models for teacher development for the promotion of learner autonomy in the classroom, on-going in-service teacher training seems to be lacking in most schools and universities. Hafner and Young (2007) launched a teacher development project called “Web-based Induction and Independent Learning Development” (WIILD) at City University of Hong Kong to provide their teaching staff with on-demand support on the web as they were going through the process of independent learning about independent learning. The process simulated exactly the same process that the learners had to go through when conducting independent learning of English. Martyn and Voller (1993) developed some orientation materials and activities, and a half-day workshop for the teachers in the English Centre (currently known as the Centre for Applied English Studies) at HKU to get them acquainted with self-access language learning and the resources available in the Language Resource Centre as a follow-up to the recommendations made by the Self-Access Action Research Group of the Centre in a previous study (see Martyn & Chan, 1992).

Although both training initiatives were welcomed by most participating teachers, they still felt uncertain about converting from a more traditional teaching practice to facilitating autonomous language learning in the classroom and the effectiveness of autonomous language learning. Researchers of both training initiatives pointed out the importance of having on-going programmes of teacher development (Hafner & Young, 2007; Martyn & Voller, 1993). Nevertheless, it appears that no teacher development programmes have been documented in those institutions since then.

## 4. Purpose of the Study

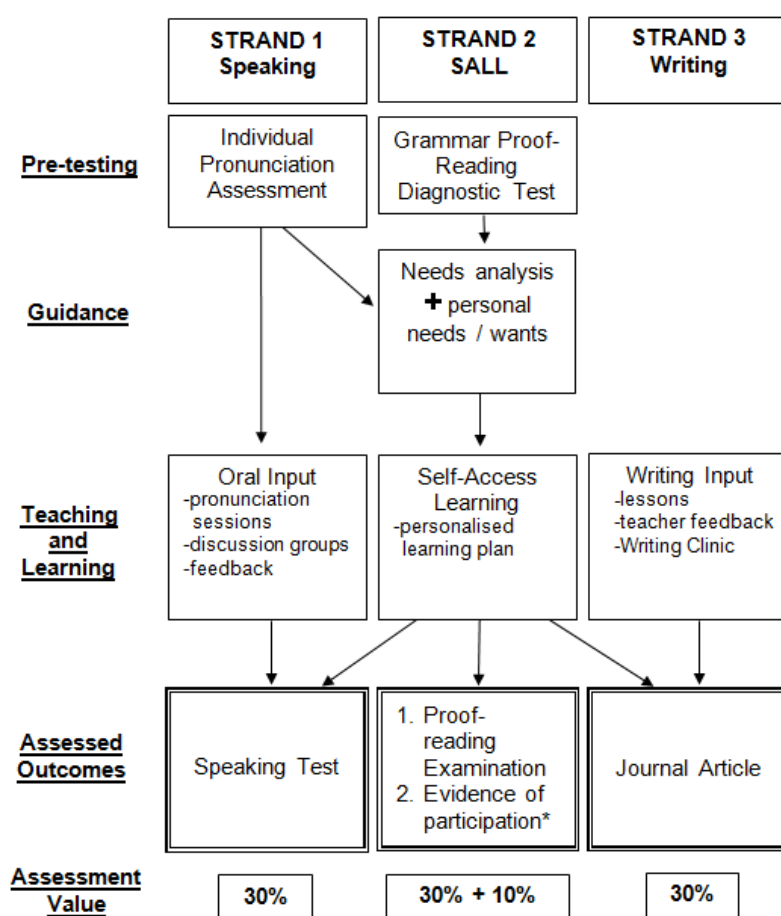
Given the mobility of staff over the years in CAES at HKU, it is worth re-addressing the unresolved issues relating to the facilitation of learner autonomy in the classroom. In that regard, this study aims to:

1. Identify challenges with which teachers of less experience in promoting learner autonomy were confronted when they were called upon to adopt an unfamiliar facilitating role in an “autonomous” classroom.
2. Understand the teacher development needs of in-service teachers involved in the promotion of learner autonomy in the classroom.
3. Recommend appropriate teacher development tools to help teachers feel more confident about the new roles afforded by an “autonomous” classroom.

## 5. Research Setting

The subjects of this study were instructors of a second-year undergraduate EAP course titled *Advanced English for Science Students* (the course will be referred to hereafter by its course code of *CAES2802*) offered by CAES. For studies of students’ perceptions of the SALL component of this course see: Gardner (2007a, 2007b) and Lai (2007). *CAES2802* was an undergraduate English enhancement

course taught in 2009-10 by twelve teachers (30% of the department's total full-time teaching staff) and had a heavy autonomous learning component which accounted for one-third of the class time during which students carried out SALL with no direct supervision by the teacher. The course had twelve two-hour sessions, eight of which were administered in small groups with half of the class (around eight to ten students) in each hour (an overview of the course is available at <http://caes.hku.hk/caes2802>). In other words, students only had to come to class for one hour for oral and pronunciation practice with the teacher and other classmates in each of those eight weeks. The hour that they spent in class was called the *Oral Hour* while the other hour that they spent outside class each week in those eight weeks in order to satisfy the SALL requirement was called the *SALL Hour*. In the other four weeks, the mode of the class meetings varied from whole class, small group to individual depending on the purpose of the sessions (e.g., lecture, consultation and assessment).



**Figure 1: Course Structure and Assessment in CAES2802**  
(Adapted from: <http://caes.hku.hk/science/caes2802>)

During the course, students were expected to complete four assessments on an individual basis, namely a journal article, a spontaneous speaking test, at least eight hours of engagement in SALL and a grammar proofreading examination (Figure 1). To better prepare for the assessments, students took diagnostic tests of grammar

proofreading and speaking at the start of the term to identify their weaknesses before devising an eight-hour SALL plan according to their learning needs and preferences.

After receiving feedback on the grammar and speaking diagnostic tests and understanding what was expected of them in the other assessment (i.e., journal article), students were advised to select one to two areas of language learning on top of the compulsory goal of improving grammatical accuracy to devise a SALL plan. After setting their SALL goals, they implemented them over 8 weeks, spending approximately one hour each week during the *SALL Hour* either at the allotted class time in the self-access centre (SAC) without being supervised by the teacher or any hour during the week at a place of their own choice. Students had opportunities to discuss their SALL experience, and receive feedback on their work from their teacher and other classmates in two *Oral Hour* sessions in the course. Teachers on the course were involved in all stages of students' SALL experience: from needs analysis to goal setting, resource recommendation to feedback on learning strategies, and progress monitoring to evaluation of learning outcomes.

## 6. Research Instruments

To find out the difficulties in-service language teachers encountered when they taught on courses with a SALL component, eleven teachers and core team members of *CAES2802* were invited to fill in a questionnaire to report on their beliefs about language learning, their perceptions of teacher and learner roles in autonomous learning and the problems they encountered when promoting autonomous learning in their classes. Ten completed questionnaires were collected.

Based on the findings from the questionnaires, a 30-minute in-depth interview was conducted with four selected teachers who were new to SALL facilitation (zero to one year of experience) to look at the problems more closely in an attempt to get more elaborate answers about future teacher development programmes.

The results of this study need to be interpreted with caution as this project studied only a small sample of teachers in a specific context in one semester. Periodical surveys of more teachers involved in SALL facilitation in institutions where SALL is used should be conducted to ensure the content of the recommended teacher development programme meets the teachers' needs.

## 7. Teachers' Profile and Perceived Difficulties

Of the ten respondents to the questionnaire, 50% had zero to two years of experience in SALL facilitation, 30% reported that they had promoted learner autonomy in the classroom for three to five years, and 20% had done so for more than five years. All four less-experienced teachers who were invited to the interviews indicated that they had not received any formal training about SALL facilitation from their previous teacher education despite some exposure to independent learning in their previous teaching context.

Despite the lack of experience in SALL facilitation, 70% of the teachers had either a very positive or positive attitude toward SALL, and the other respondents were neutral. Most respondents stated that SALL is generally a good idea because it lays

the basis for life-long, self-directed, individualized learning although they named some problems that SALL entails including assessment, learner motivation and SALL being made compulsory in a course.

Although most respondents were positive about SALL, the less-experienced ones admitted at the interviews that they did not feel confident in recommending resources in the SAC to their students. They attributed this lack of confidence to three factors: 1) there was no orientation for new teachers to the SAC; 2) there was not enough time for new teachers to try out the learning materials before the course started since the pre-term meeting was called only one week before the term commenced; and 3) the resource list provided to teachers to hand out to students was overwhelmingly long with no indication of the levels of the materials. These factors put less-experienced teachers in a difficult situation when students were trying to seek advice.

While advising about SALL materials seems to have bothered mostly less-experienced teachers, learner motivation was an issue for most instructors teaching on *CAES2802*. 80% of the respondents either disagreed with or were neutral about the statement “*SALL is motivational*”. They described in their qualitative comments in the questionnaire that the lack of motivation on the learners’ part was one of the major problems they had encountered in facilitating SALL despite their attempts to motivate learners by encouraging commitment, helping them overcome obstacles, etc. Some teachers wrote:

Could be a waste of time if students are not motivated or do not know what is best for them.

Effectiveness may diminish for students who lack motivation.

It can be difficult for students to motivate themselves.

Although the teachers complained about their students’ lack of motivation, they made very little attempt to develop learners’ metacognitive skills. 70% of questionnaire respondents reported that they did not put much emphasis on one or more of the following tasks:

1. Finding out about learner styles and the corresponding learning strategies.
2. Applying the information [about learner styles and learning strategies] when negotiating a learning plan with their students.
3. Ensuring students’ chosen learning activities were appropriate to their needs and learning styles.
4. Helping students apply learning strategies in their SALL.

It was revealed at the interviews that teachers felt that they did not have adequate time and support for carrying out these tasks which were crucial in fostering learner autonomy.

Teachers also perceived that they often ran into problems when they were promoting learner autonomy in the classroom. Table 1 shows the perceived difficulties that teachers expressed in the questionnaire. The two most frequently-mentioned problems that teachers encountered when facilitating SALL were the effectiveness of SALL (50%) and the performance of students in SALL (40%).



**Table 1: Teachers' Perceived Difficulties in SALL Facilitation**

Teachers' Perceived Difficulties	Percentage (N = 10)
Doubtful about the effectiveness of SALL	50%
Frustrated with the performance of students	40%
Insufficient class time	30%
Uncertain about the amount and form of feedback to be given to students	20%
Uncertain about the amount of guidance/ freedom to be given to students	20%
Not sure if they have adequate knowledge required for facilitating independent learning	20%
Uncertain about their own role in the classroom	10%
Not confident in their skills of facilitation in the classroom	10%

As mentioned previously in this paper, teachers generally had a positive attitude towards SALL. To their disappointment, however, they did not see students making good use of the opportunity to take control of their learning. One teacher wrote:

SALL can be effective if students take full advantage of the opportunity. I'm not sure most of students do so, however.

Teachers also expressed their concern about the extent to which SALL would help students to improve their language skills. This concern was probably due to the diminishing direct control from teachers of what and how the students would learn in the process of SALL. One teacher put his concern this way:

From the admin point of view it's very effective. As for learning gains, I'm not sure. It's very personal and only known to the students.

Another reason for teachers to doubt the effectiveness of SALL was the lack of commitment on the learners' part in the implementation of SALL. This is closely related to learner motivation as discussed earlier. Teachers made the following comments:

The effectiveness [of SALL] is doubtful as students tend to do it in the last minute.

SALL is motivating for the selected few, who, in turn, don't really need SALL to push them if they really want to learn.

I feel that many students view it as a hurdle to jump and therefore they focus more on just giving me something rather than truly applying themselves

In addition to teachers' cynical views of the effectiveness of SALL, some teachers were frustrated with the performance of their students over the course of the 12-week semester. The frustration stemmed from the insufficient effort students put into SALL and the absence of significant improvement in students' English

proficiency by the end of the course. The following are remarks made by teachers which show their dissatisfaction with students' performance:

Some students are not keeping up with the weekly 1-hour of SALL.

Performance in SALL, not performance in language.

Some students do not put enough effort into matching needs/ wants with activities despite explanations and advice.”

It is evident that the perceived difficulties in facilitating SALL in the classroom reported by the teachers in this study are in line with the literature to a large extent. Surprisingly, teachers with less experience in SALL facilitation did not seem to have a very clear idea of what they want or need to know about SALL facilitation. They also tended to be less convinced of the need for teacher development in SALL facilitation and attributed the problems mostly to the lack of time for SALL facilitation in class.

## 8. Topics of Interest for Teachers

Despite a lack of strong awareness of the need for teacher development among the less-experienced teachers, they and some of the more experienced teachers did mention issues relevant to facilitating learner autonomy that they would like to have addressed through teacher development they include:

1. Recent development of research on learner autonomy.
2. How to motivate students to commit to SALL.
3. How to give formative feedback and monitor students' progress.
4. Assessment practices of students' SALL outcomes.
5. Suggestions on SA activities for improving different areas of language.
6. A teachers' guide to learning resources in the SAC and on the web.

Among the ten teachers who participated in this study, very few of them indicated they knew much about the field of learner autonomy or had been following research in the field. Given their limited knowledge about the concept of learner autonomy and its shifting focuses of research (e.g., from learners acquiring a language independently in self-access centres to learners making informed decisions of learning and taking control of their learning in a learning context of their choice with the support of peers, teachers and institutions), some information about the recent development of research on learner autonomy which is of direct relevance to the teaching contexts of the teachers would be useful. The provision of such information would possibly give teachers a better understanding of the rationale for autonomous learning, and thus increase their confidence in pitching the concept to their students and giving necessary support to them.

As previously mentioned in this paper, students' lack of motivation to carry out their SALL was one of the biggest problems that teachers were facing when rendering support to them. Teachers, therefore, would like to equip themselves with some techniques which enable them to arouse students' interest in SALL and sustain their interest to carry on with the endeavour. Teachers reported that the less-motivated students, in fact, had a more urgent need to improve their language skills than those motivated achievers. Thus, teachers indicated a strong desire to acquire the necessary skills to help those less-motivated students make the most out of SALL.

Another source of frustration that teachers felt about SALL facilitation was student underperformance. Some teachers were disappointed to see that the effort the students put into SALL and the improvement made in their language proficiency were minimal. They agreed that it might help if 1) students received more feedback and guidance during the process, 2) students' progress was monitored more regularly, and 3) the outcomes of SALL were assessed upon completion. It was believed that some form of monitoring and assessment would help boost the performance of students; however, some teachers were not sure if close monitoring and assessment of SALL which constitutes part of the final course grade would prevent students from exercising autonomy in their learning. Thus, teachers would benefit if issues such as formative feedback, monitoring progress and assessment practices in relation to SALL were addressed in an in-service teacher development programme.

Giving formative feedback on students' performance in SALL inevitably involves making recommendations of learning strategies and resources to students. Nevertheless, less-experienced teachers found it challenging, especially when it was the first time they had taught on the course. Teachers would appreciate some suggestions on the learning strategies and independent learning activities that will boost learners' performance in different language areas. In addition, a teachers' guide to the learning resources in the SAC and on the web would enable teachers to explore relevant self-access resources to complement the learning strategies and independent learning activities they recommend to students.

## 9. Preferred Forms of In-Service Development

With the teaching and other administrative duties teachers had to deal with every day, most teachers in this study favoured electronic delivery of information on the web. Table 2 shows teachers' preferences for the forms of in-service teacher development for SALL facilitation. They felt that pathways for facilitating autonomous learning in the classroom and SALL resources (70%), and web-based on-demand resources for learning about learner autonomy (60%) would afford them flexibility and choice in their pursuit of knowledge of SALL facilitation. More personal exchanges of ideas with colleagues and intensive information sessions or workshops on autonomous learning (considered as more demanding of teachers' time) would attract 40% of the teachers if organized sparsely throughout the academic year.

**Table 2: Teachers' Preferences for Forms of In-service Teacher Development**

<b>Teachers' Preferred Forms of In-service Teacher Development</b>	<b>Percentage (N = 10)</b>
Pathways for facilitating autonomous learning in the classroom and SALL resources	70 %
Web-based on-demand resources for learning about learner autonomy	60 %
Periodic exchanges of ideas with colleagues	40 %
Regular information sessions and workshops on specific areas of autonomous learning	40%
Orientation tour to SAC	20%
Self-reflection sessions on teachers' own pedagogical practices	10 %

Only a small proportion of the teachers preferred an orientation tour to the SAC (20%) and self-reflection sessions on teachers' own pedagogical practices (10%) as part of the in-service teacher development programme. Some teachers said that they would rather obtain the information about the SAC on a web-based, on-demand resource site. Teachers' less favourable responses to face-to-face, reflective teacher-development activities may be a result of their hectic work schedule.

## 10. In-Service Development Programme (OWL)

Taking account of the needs and preferences of teachers for support for the facilitating role in an autonomous classroom, a solution is an in-service development programme (OWL) consisting of the following three levels of implementation:

1. **O**rientation for new teachers.
2. **W**orkshops on learner autonomy and SALL facilitation.
3. **L**earner autonomy and SALL facilitation virtual resource centre.

Levels 2 and 3 target teachers at all levels of experience and address differing concerns about helping students acquire English in an autonomous setting.

### 10.1 Orientation for teachers new to autonomous learning

As new teachers usually have very limited or almost no experience with autonomous learning, they need to be given an induction to: the concept of autonomous learning; its rationale; the resources available in the SAC; the potential problems teachers might run into during implementation; and the kind of support they can expect to be given during the semester. The latter includes information about future workshops and pointers on how to access resources for SALL facilitation. The components of the orientation (Figure 2) would introduce new teachers to the fundamentals of SALL and orientate them to the resources and support network readily available to them in order to reduce their levels of anxiety about the unfamiliar role of a facilitator in the classroom.

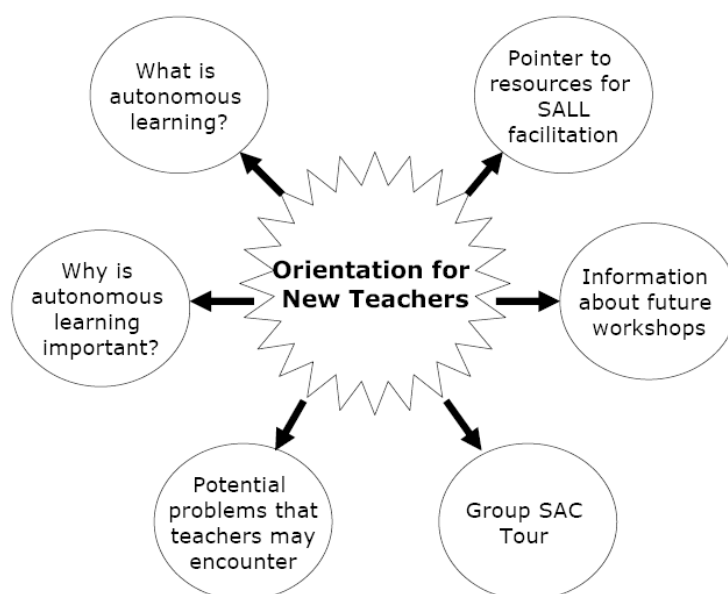


Figure 2: Orientation for Teachers New to Autonomous Learning

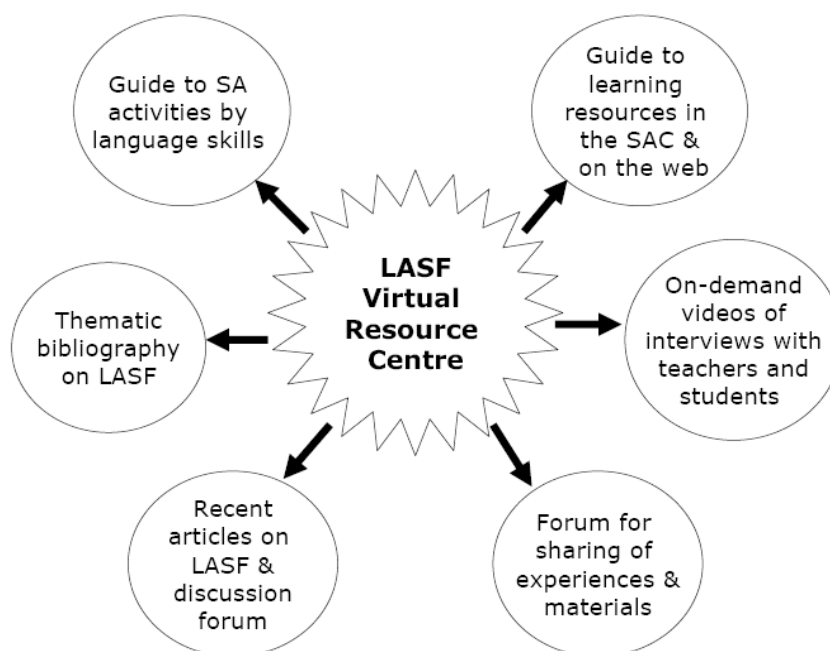
## 10.2 Workshops on learner autonomy and SALL facilitation

As continued support in the workplace is crucial for teachers' development of both the knowledge and techniques of SALL facilitation, workshops should be offered to teachers on a regular basis. Nevertheless, teachers' participation in those workshops depends largely on their availability and the perceived relevance of the topics of the workshops to their teaching contexts. In addition, a strong emphasis on current research and practices of developing learner autonomy and exchanges of ideas among teachers is necessary when conducting these workshops. Topics that are likely to interest teachers include 1) how to motivate students to commit to SALL; 2) how to give formative feedback and monitor students' progress; and 3) assessment practices of students' SALL outcomes. Taking into account the busy schedule of teachers during the semester, the number of workshops should be limited to one or two each semester or an interval acceptable to teachers.

## 10.3 Virtual resource centre for teachers

To give teachers around-the-clock support regardless of space, a web-based resource centre which provides teachers with on-line access to resources about learner autonomy and SALL facilitation (LASF) should be part of the in-service teacher development programme. The aim of the LASF Virtual Resource Centre would be to facilitate exchanges of ideas and sharing of resources and materials.

The LASF Virtual Resource Centre (Figure 3) would have six components in which the information about LASF could be sought by teachers according to their interests and needs. The components are 1) a guide to learning resources in the SAC and on the web; 2) a guide to SA activities by language skills; 3) a thematic bibliography on LASF; 4) recent articles on LASF & discussion forum; 5) a forum for sharing experiences and materials; and 6) on-demand videos of interviews with teachers and students.



**Figure 3: Structure of Virtual Resource Centre of Learner Autonomy and SALL Facilitation**

It is worth noting that in addition to the guides to self-access and classroom resources for SALL and a thematic bibliography, the LASF Virtual Resource Centre would promote interactions and collegiality among teachers. The discussion forum would provide a platform for teachers to express their views on or raise questions about issues relating to learner autonomy. Teachers with more experience in the topics being discussed in the articles will be invited to be the moderators for the discussion forum. The purpose of the other forum in the LASF Virtual Resource Centre is to encourage sharing of classroom experiences, innovations, materials regarding SALL among colleagues in the workplace.

Teachers will not only read and write about learner autonomy and autonomous learning at the LASF Virtual Resource Centre, they will also be provided with on-demand access to a collection of videos of interviews with experts in the field of learner autonomy, SALL facilitators, language advisors in the SAC and students having positive SALL learning outcomes and/or experiences. The interviews can address topics that interest most teachers such as learner motivation, identification of learning needs, feedback on SALL progress, and assessment of learning outcomes. It is anticipated that teachers will learn from the experts' advice and the success stories of other colleagues and students.

## 11. Conclusion

With the increasing expectation to help students become autonomous learners in language classes, there is a great demand from teachers, especially newer ones, for support and development in this respect. It is, therefore, useful to provide them with the support which addresses the problems that they are facing in the classroom. This study found that most teachers were mainly concerned about the effectiveness of SALL for students who were not motivated to work independently on their language learning but, in fact, needed SALL most. Students' performance in SALL was the other primary source of frustration for many teachers. Time management, provision of feedback and level of control, knowledge about SALL facilitation were, among others, the common challenges that teachers had to overcome.

Taking the development needs and time constraints of in-service teachers into account, a three-tier in-service teacher development programme called *OWL* which consists of 1) Orientation for new teachers; 2) Workshops on learner autonomy and SALL facilitation; and 3) Learner autonomy and SALL facilitation virtual resource centre is proposed in this paper. Nevertheless, the generalizability of the *OWL* programme is yet to be examined by further research of its format and components. Some adjustments might be necessary to suit the needs of institutions adopting the programme.

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# Changing Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes Towards Autonomous Learning

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## Abstract

Although the literature in language teaching emphasizes a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches, in reality many EFL classes are still teacher-centred. This paper uses the author's extensive experience as a learner, teacher and teacher trainer to explore the possible reasons for this situation, the obstructions to change and a potential way forward.

**Key words:** EFL, autonomy, beliefs, attitudes, teacher training, Turkey

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## 1. Introduction

The literature in EFL emphasizes the shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred EFL classes but they remain teacher-centred perhaps due to teacher beliefs passed from one generation to another. Teachers seem to be reluctant to change their roles for the sake of creating autonomous EFL classes. So it is not easy to change teachers' cognition (thoughts, knowledge and beliefs). This paper aims to reflect the observations of the writer which she hopes will give some insights to teacher trainers.

## 2. The Problem

Teacher cognition is highly affected by teacher's past learning experiences which have an impact on their instructional decisions (Borg, 2007). Teacher knowledge is formed throughout teachers' school days and their teaching practices. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) believe that teacher knowledge is composed of:

1. Subject matter knowledge (e.g. how English grammar works).
2. Pedagogical knowledge (e.g. how to teach and assess).
3. Pedagogical content knowledge (e.g. how to teach writing).
4. Knowledge of learners and their characteristics (e.g. how they tend to respond to group and individual tasks).
5. Knowledge of educational contexts (e.g. whether the L2 is a second or foreign language at the elementary, secondary or post-secondary level).
6. Knowledge of the curriculum and educational ends (e.g. whether/how the content is integrated into language learning).



Subject matter knowledge, in other words knowledge of English grammar, is taught for many years starting at primary school. This is the knowledge the students of English as a Foreign Language know best. Pedagogical knowledge and the pedagogical content knowledge are given at the universities where teacher education is carried out. These two types of knowledge need to be revised throughout the teaching practices of the Professional life. Knowledge of learners and their characteristics is gained during the teaching practices. But teachers do not know how to handle this knowledge. They know a lot about their learners but they do not collect information scientifically. They do not know for example how to learn about their learners' learning styles and strategies. If they study such techniques before graduation or if they attend seminars on this issue they can then design their classroom activities accordingly. Knowledge of educational contexts is not given properly in their initial education. The candidates do their practicum in one school only at either elementary or secondary level. They are aware of different levels but they only face the reality of what this means in practice when they become teachers. Teacher candidates possess the knowledge of curriculum and educational ends but again only face the reality of its practical implications later.

Teacher education covers all the knowledge stated above to enable the candidates to teach. However teacher candidates need more knowledge on how to be a good teacher. There is a gap between their knowledge and practice. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) give a good example of a teacher who teaches only one formal greeting although she knows that other forms exist. They ask why she teaches in this way and they emphasize the importance of this question in understanding the teacher's beliefs (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, pp. 27-8). This reminds me of a situation I encountered during my first visit to England. While I was waiting at a bus stop, a young man approached me and asked "Have you got the time?" I did not understand the question and went back to my culture and thought that he was after something else and my immediate answer was "What for?" The gentleman showed me his wrist and asked again "What is the time please?" I was ashamed of my ill thoughts. But it wasn't my fault. My English teacher taught me only "What time is it?" I did not know any other way of asking the time. I was taught in this way but my experience changed my practices and I taught my students the other ways of asking the time. Teacher trainers/educators should not only supply the pedagogical knowledge on how to teach but also need to train the candidates to become teachers who would change their teaching practices when necessary. It is not easy to change though. We cannot change our hair dressers, our butchers or other habits easily. It takes years to get used to doing something and it is not easy to change it in a minute. Teacher candidates need to be trained for lifelong learning so that they will not resist the need to change.

Change should occur on three levels: materials, actions and beliefs (Gardner, 2008). To be able to create an autonomous atmosphere, teachers need to change materials, text books and syllabuses. Teachers need to learn another foreign language to be able to empathise with the difficulties of language learners. Finally they need to change their teaching beliefs and practices. In their formal training, teacher candidates are exposed to old and new ideas put forward in ELT. They are even taught how to engage in professional development. Once they take the responsibility of teaching, they usually try to adapt all the techniques with great enthusiasm. But when they are disillusioned with the reality, they start doing what others do, follow the text book, consult experienced teachers or teachers' manuals and ultimately believe in teacher

centeredness. Students expect them to teach and they are there to teach. This might look a pessimist view but unfortunately this is the reality at least for autonomy in EFL classes. Teachers are reluctant to give the learning responsibility to their students. It is not easy to change teacher beliefs.

### 3. An Example of Teacher Resistance to Change

It is widely agreed that autonomy refers to the learner's broad approach to the learning process, rather than a particular mode of teaching and each learner has a different approach to learning (Dam, 1990; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Teachers need to find out learners' learning styles and strategies and raise awareness about their own learning styles (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). If our aim, as teachers is to bring our students up to a certain level of proficiency in the foreign language they learn, we need to do explicit learner training to get to the point.

Having read a lot about autonomous language classes, I decided, as the head of an ELT section, to bring in change. I started with two weeks of teacher training on learner autonomy, learning styles and strategies and how to train learners to take responsibility of their own learning. After the training teachers chose the textbooks and prepared the syllabuses for reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar skills. They administered electronic learner styles and strategies questionnaires and kept the results in teacher portfolios. They kept records of their students' progress and shared them with their students. Portfolio assessment was accepted as an assessment tool. Portfolio assessment measures a student's ability over time and it is done by the student and the teacher, not by the teacher alone. Most important of all, students learn how to take responsibility.

For writing skills portfolio assessment was conducted successfully. Both teachers and students were happy and the results were satisfactory. Writing teachers volunteered to teach writing. They were used to reading papers and giving feedback and asking the students to do the editing. They conducted a questionnaire on learner styles and strategies for writing. Then they shared the results with their students. They did an orientation about writing classes and made everything clear for the students. The students were informed about the portfolio assessment. They were also informed about peer-evaluation and self-evaluation. They were asked to keep portfolios.

Teachers of other language skills found the changes difficult. They were supposed to do similar things. They were supposed to guide the students who would work on projects, keep all the records about each student in their portfolios and discuss the progress with their students. These teachers started complaining about the extra work. They said they were overloaded. They did not want to do the portfolio assessment although they stated that they found it beneficial. There was resistance and they wanted to go back to the old system where they would read and evaluate exam papers once a month. Teachers' contact hours were 24 per week. I wanted to reduce it but the administration did not accept paying for extra hours. As a result, I had to give up. They used all the materials and changed some of the classroom activities but they went back to the old system of assessment. It was not easy to change teacher actions. It was an exploratory practice and there were many factors to explore.

## 4. A New Design for Teacher Training

The aims and objectives of teacher training can be designed in line with the aims and objectives of The European Profile for Language Teacher Education: A Frame of Reference which has been designed after a period of careful thought and experience (Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza, & McEvoy, 2004). This report proposes a European Profile for language teacher education in the 21st century. It deals with the initial and in-service education of foreign language teachers in primary, secondary and adult learning contexts and it offers a frame of reference for language education policy makers and language teacher educators in Europe. The Profile presents 40 key elements in initial and in-service language teacher education courses. In particular, it focuses on innovative teacher education practices and ways of promoting cooperation, exchange and mobility among the new generation of Europe's language teachers. Some of the key elements that will lead to change in teacher beliefs can be stated as follows:

- Training in the development of a critical and enquiring approach to teaching and learning
- Training teachers to become reflective in their profession
- Training teachers to be aware of the importance of life-long learning
- Participation in links with partners abroad, including visits, exchanges or ICT links
- period of work or study in a country or countries where the trainee's foreign language is spoken as native (Kelly, et al., 2004, p. 5)

Both novice teachers and experienced teachers need a special training to develop a critical and enquiring approach towards teaching. The materials they use in their classes, for example, need to be analysed critically. They need to produce innovative materials which would appeal to learners who possess different intelligences and a variety of learning styles. Leung (in Burns & Richards, 2009) believes that if practising teachers criticize the present handed down from the past and feel the need for professional development, they need to be engaged in reflexive examination of their own beliefs and action in order to take action to effect change where appropriate. This kind of reflective action is highly appreciated for professional development. Teachers also need to be aware of the importance of life-long learning. They need to learn another foreign language and possess the empathy for how it feels to learn a foreign language and how it works. Then, teachers will not do the mistakes they are doing subconsciously and their teaching practices will change positively. Partners abroad will give them a chance to exchange teaching tips which will have an impact on the classroom activities. Being in a country where English is spoken as a native language will give teachers insight into the use of language in daily life which in return will encourage them to use colloquial English in their classes and avoid the "Have you got the time?" example cited given above.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not easy to change teacher beliefs and attitudes, and it is not easy to create the shift from teacher centred EFL classes to learner centred ones. Teachers rely on their own knowledge and their own language learning experiences. To change their knowledge about learner-centred foreign language teaching, we need to change

their learning experiences. We need to give them explicit training about autonomous learning. As Rousseau says:

Whatever your pupil knows, he should know not because you have told him, but because he has grasped it himself.

J.J. Rousseau (1712-1778)

Teachers need to convince themselves that students learn when they want to learn and what they want to learn, not what the teacher teaches them. So, teachers need to encourage students to grasp things themselves, in other words they need to create learner-centred classes where students take decisions. They need to give their students the necessary training to take the responsibility of their own learning.

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# Classroom Texts and Tasks for Promoting Learner Autonomy in Teacher Education Programmes: A postmodern reflection on action

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the concept of postmodern theory is closely related to the concept of learner autonomy. First, the relationship between the postmodern theory of education and the concept of learner autonomy is articulated and then some classroom texts and tasks used by the writer for promoting learner autonomy in a foreign language teacher education program are shared. Experiential knowledge and practical classroom tasks are delivered through vignettes, each of which can be used in English language classrooms with minor changes. These texts and tasks can also be used for teacher-development purposes.

**Key words:** postmodern, autonomy, text, task, reflection, action, vignette, teacher development, EFL, teacher development, Turkey

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## 1. Introduction

Globalisation, massification, shrinking resources, the proliferation of information and communication technologies, increased demands for quality assurance and increasing competition among higher education institutions have all contributed towards changing the traditional role of academics. (Mostert & Quinn, 2009)

The above grew out of what we call the postmodern world. Amidst these changes, the concept of learner autonomy has gained much attention along with many other concepts which have affected the theory and practice of foreign language teaching. This paper articulates the relationship between the postmodern theory of education and the concept of learner autonomy and shares some classroom texts and tasks used by the writer for promoting learner autonomy in a foreign language teacher education program.

## 2. Postmodern Theory and Learner Autonomy

There are strong similarities between the postmodern theory of education and learner autonomy. Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy is:

- To take charge of one's learning [including]:
- determining the objectives
  - defining the contents and progressions
  - selecting methods and techniques to be used
  - monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.)
  - evaluating what has been acquired. (Holec, 1981, p. 3)

Little (2006) suggests, Holec's definition "entails that autonomous learners can freely apply their knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning." Curtis (2004, p. 8) suggests that "the idea of constructing one's own knowledge is the fundamental precept of both learner autonomy and postmodern theory." We may assume there is a single theory of the postmodern, as Curtis (2004, p. 3) further explains, "some common themes and practices have emerged among postmodern theorists." Locating power and its regulation of society is one of the major interests of postmodernism (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). Knowledge is a major locus of power in today's world. Hence, the relationship between how individuals gain power in their daily and professional activities needs in-depth examination. This need is even more pressing when English as a foreign language teacher education programs are considered mainly because prospective teachers who receive education in these programs will face a multitude of challenges that are specific to their profession. This paper explores the promotion of learner autonomy in teacher education programs and offers concrete applications of classroom texts and tasks in order to illustrate how to promote learner autonomy in teacher education programs in a theory-informed practical manner.

From a postmodern perspective, educational practices situated in teacher education programs, as in many other contexts, may resemble what Foucault calls a process of "normalization" which functions as modern disciplinary power pushing individuals to accept the principle of a set of rules to be followed. Hence, the challenge postmodern educational theory puts forward is rather simple although it presents the world in bifurcation of our professional reality. This bifurcation, from a postmodern perspective entails answering this single question given, again, in the form of a bifurcation: do we "educate" to normalize our future teachers through classroom texts and tasks which demand acceptance of the knowledge we give in a way to "produce" the same or similar future teachers as if they are produced in mass factories? Or do we participate in a process of "educating" ourselves, our programs, and prospective teachers in a way to support pluralism and individuals' unique development as teachers as well as learners and human beings? Our answer to this question is fundamentally important especially when we aim to promote learner autonomy.

It has been proposed that autonomous learners are experiential as well as experimenting learners who mould their own learning (Thanasoulas, 2000). Similarly, as Edwards and Usher (1994, pp. 211-2) suggest, a postmodern education system insists on an education which:

1. Offers diversity in goals, learning processes, organizational structures, curricula, methods and participants.
2. Does not aim to reproduce society but demand for a limitless growth in both time and space.
3. Rejects uniformity, standardized curricula, mechanical teaching methods, and insistence on rationality.
4. Attains greater participation by including culturally diverse learners into the learning and teaching processes.

Ward (2003) argues that the concept of meaning is key in learning a foreign language and that both students and teachers should know their roles in education while interacting to negotiate through learning and using vocabulary and skills that are directed towards making meaning in what they already know in and about that language. In such a practice, student-centred learning and teaching evolves so as to include students by recognizing their individual differences. While doing that, teachers work as mediators and facilitators in meaning-making so that appropriate learning occurs. In this process, students are also given certain responsibilities and tasks which depend on the time, context, students' level, and the methodological perspective employed by the teachers themselves.

Reflective teaching combines skills development with knowledge building. During any reflective teaching process, teachers learn from their experience while experiencing content itself. Hatton and Smith (2006) propose that reflective thinking should address practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity so that possible solutions are reached. Thus, writing offers a chance to develop students' reflection on various issues related to their growing professional knowledge and experience. As Berry suggests:

several teachers do address issues that contain particular knowledge about the world, people, relationships, situations, or historical events that need to be challenged; that is, they not only teach what is legitimized by the dominant paradigms of science, but the truths that are needed for the reproduction of existing social arrangements. (Berry, 2000, p. 10)

Similarly, postmodernist applications emphasize connecting the process of the finished product with its creation, an example of which is the Mother Tongue Project, a collection of art jointly created by the viewers and the original artists (Alter-Muri & Klein, 2007). In this process, art objects are accompanied by written statements from the artist. Individuals who come to the gallery are invited to create art in reaction to these "original" art objects. The art object, as a finished product becomes a joint product of the artists, both the original artist and the viewer, created through a mutual and respectful dialogue

Curtis (2004, p. 3) also argues that within the postmodern realm, reading "everyday cultural products (ordinary objects and occurrences such as a soap opera or professional wrestling matches)" as instructional texts is as valid as reading those canonical educational texts that have traditionally been used. Hence, it can even be claimed that postmodern theory of education's insistence on everyday cultural products as classroom materials resembles Communicative Language Teaching's insistence on authentic materials as classroom texts. Thus, as Araya and González articulate:

postmodern perspectives about language teaching-learning processes approach teacher knowledge as everyday affective and performative practices... [because] teacher knowledge is a very particular way of feeling and doing things. (Araya & González, 2009, p. 5)

The importance of having more and more cross-disciplinarity in all aspects of schooling is now obvious (Curtis, 2004) and recent approaches and techniques that are used in teacher education programs make use of a postmodern view of education all of which centre around two main concepts, namely, reflection and action. While inviting participants to reflect on their own experiences in providing action to bridge their experiences with solutions, a postmodern education system demands as well as distributes diversity, limitlessness, participation, and loosening of boundaries (Edwards & Usher, 1994).

The term eclecticism, meaning borrowing of pieces from many methodologies and approaches while constructing a syllabus or course outline, is not different from a bricolage, a postmodern device introduced by Strauss (1962), the “bricoleur” signifying a person who takes pieces of culture and reassembles them the way he or she finds necessary. In our era, as English language professionals know well, the teacher is seen as an eclectic methodologist, in other words, a bricoleur, who makes use of all methodologies and approaches along with their techniques and styles to present a meaningful and doable lesson. In that sense, every English language teacher today is a postmodern teacher whose own style of teaching and developing coursework is inextricably linked to postmodern theory and practice. Not only the teacher, but also the researcher today can be considered as a postmodern identity who makes use of mixed methods and classroom studies energized through the theories and insights gained from various research methods and previous studies. As Kincheloe (2005, p. 323) asserts, many “new forms of complex, multi-methodological, multi-logical forms of inquiry into the social, cultural, political, psychological, and educational domains” are currently used all of which are closely linked to the concept of the bricolage which offers us a chance to represent the social reality through multiple perspectives.

### 3. Texts and Tasks for Promoting Learner Autonomy

...students retain 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear and 30% of what they see, but they can recall 70% of what they discuss with others and 95% of what they actually teach (Lazear, 1990 cited in Curtis, 2004, p. 5)

When these figures are taken into account, it can be suggested that prospective teachers of English should be given opportunities to discuss what they are actually learning at the end of which they teach what they learn. This, however, should not be confused with the “presentations” students make in undergraduate courses because teaching, here, signifies a process of designing course materials and lesson plans in a real classroom atmosphere during which the student has full responsibility in planning and delivering the course content. In such a process, then, the student-teacher becomes an autonomous learner who plans and delivers as she prepares her repertoire while mastering the skills of an autonomous learner.



Among many classroom applications that could be used in the education of the prospective teacher, Shor (1992), for instance, tries to build a classroom inquiry which goes beyond the limits of the classroom so as to engulf and affect everyday life including students' families as well as government authorities. An example of Shor's inquiry-based class work is:

1. Instructor poses the question: "Is street violence a problem in your lives?"
2. Students collect their family members' opinions on the issue.
3. Peer critique to improve writing skills while discussing opinions.
4. Producing fiction: Students write a story about a character who tries to stop violence in the neighbourhood.
5. Publishing booklets for school and society.
6. Researching how violence is represented in different texts.
7. Making use of history and literature to study violence.
8. Comparing their families' responses to other texts including their own by reading aloud.
9. Asking "what changes are needed to reduce violence? What should the mayor do to make your neighbourhood safe? What should the police do? What should neighbours themselves do?"
10. The instructor, having received students' permission, sends all of their reports or work to the mayor, the police chief, to local papers, and to community organizations.

### Vignette 1: Autobiographical writing

The importance of Shor's (1992) ideas can be compared to our own academic environment. For instance, what would the process and product of such an inquiry-based education be like in our own courses in which students conduct research into their own lives in an autobiographical way to find answers to "Why people in their families and environment can't speak English" (see Figure 1 for an example). These teachers would bring together their autobiographical lived experiences on the issue to inform the researchers in the field and the National Ministry of Education in Turkey by proposing their solutions.

My father cannot speak English because he could not study beyond 7<sup>th</sup> grade. My mother can speak a little because in the past education was "so different." They had the "bachelor system" which meant that "they had to take both written and oral exams to pass all courses including English."  
Selim, 4th year ELT student

**Figure 1: Example of Autobiographical Writing**

### Vignette 2: Using the "affective"

Research on foreign language learners' attitudes toward learning English has revealed that educational programs should include educational objectives to develop students' affective skills and love for learning (Saracaloğlu, 1995). In a teacher education course offered by Patrick Diamond in 1997, Xavier Fazio wrote an autobiographical topic-poem (Figure 2) in which he questioned how well his students learned Meiosis (a cellular phenomenon).

Learning Meiosis

I write about Meiosis on the board.  
Do they learn Meiosis?  
I illustrate Meiosis using a video.  
Do they learn Meiosis?  
I demonstrate Meiosis using pipe cleaners.  
Do they learn Meiosis?  
They draw Meiosis in their notebooks.  
Do they learn Meiosis?  
I give them microscopic slides to see Meiosis.  
Do they learn Meiosis?  
I test them on Meiosis.  
Do they learn Meiosis?  
Class median is 64%.

**Figure 2: Autobiographical Topic-poem by Xavier Fazio  
(in Diamond & Mullen, 1999, p. 84)**

### Vignette 3: Using everyday objects

It has been expressed repeatedly in numerous research studies that all learning is about making connections. In any class I teach, whenever I want to review the content previously studied, I bring a real-life object into the classroom and ask students to connect how this object relates to what we study. In groups or individually, prospective teachers work hard towards matching these two rather abstract knowledge pieces in a meaningful way. The result is valuable because students employ various techniques and strategies to ponder around the qualities of the object and the features of the teaching methods and approaches in detail so that a sound relationship is established.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper shows the similarities between postmodern theory and learner autonomy by reviewing theoretical and practical applications. Knowing that learner autonomy is closely related to life-long learning, it is hoped that teacher educators use multiple sign systems to trigger their future colleagues' enthusiasm and eagerness to learn. The purpose of this paper is to show that postmodern theory has a lot to offer to achieve these tasks. However, it has been known since as early as the 10th century that, as Gazali (cited by Oruç, 2009, p. 94) suggested, knowledge and action are inseparable for "if a person reads and learns one hundred thousand issues without putting them into practice, these will not give benefit to this person." Therefore, apart from teaching the principles of learner autonomy to individuals, teacher education programs should monitor how learner autonomy is put into practice by individuals, a problem which is as important as what counts as learner autonomy in particular locales.

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## Teacher Trainees' Autonomous Development Through Reflection

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### Abstract

In recent years, the concept of reflection has been proposed as a means of professional teaching development. The purposes of this study are 1) to describe and illustrate how Japanese student teachers in the English language become more aware of their teaching through reflection, and 2) to find out how they acquire and develop attitudes and skills essential for self-direction and self-control in teaching English. The data I describe here was collected in Japan in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodology course. The course is required of pre-service teacher-education programs, offering theories of teaching, language teaching methods and approaches, and a teaching practicum. My conclusion is as follows: In order to make progress in our teaching, we need to follow three steps: plan (lesson planning), perform (teaching practice), and reflect (peer observations and self-observations). Teachers tend to make light of the third step, reflection, but it is self-observation that lets us consider our teaching objectively, find different ways of teaching, and design more contextually relevant lesson plans. Self-observation makes teacher exploration possible in a plan-perform-reflect cycle.

**Key words:** autonomous development, reflection, peer-observation, self-observation, lesson planning, teaching practice, Japanese student teachers

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### 1. Introduction

Reflection can be seen as a process that facilitates both learning and understanding. In recent years, the concept of reflection has been proposed as a means of professional teaching development. Such a concept involves teachers observing themselves, collecting data about their teaching skills and behaviours, and using that data as a basis for self-evaluation for change, and hence for professional growth. Reflection and self-inquiry are key components of teacher development. Reflection is a response to past teaching experience as a basis for evaluation and decision making, as well as a resource for planning and action. According to Pak (1986), ultimately, teaching will probably only improve through self-analysis and self-evaluation.

Reflective teachers are the ones who can monitor, criticize, and defend their actions in planning, implementing, and evaluating language programs. Nunan & Lamb (1996, p. 121) outline the knowledge and skills required for reflective language teaching in relation to the key curriculum areas of planning, implementation, and evaluation (Table 1).

**Table 1: Knowledge and Skills Required for Reflective Teaching  
(after Nunan & Lamb, 1996)**

<b>Planning</b>	Reflective teachers should be sensitive to a range of learner needs (objective and subjective). They should be able to use these as a basis for selecting and organizing goals, objectives, content, and learning experiences of language programs. They should also have knowledge of the nature of language and language learning, as well as the ability to use this knowledge in selecting and organizing goals, objectives, content, and learning experiences of language programs.
<b>Implementation</b>	Reflective teachers should have technical competence in instruction and classroom management. They need to be able to analyse and critique their own classroom behaviour and the behaviour of their learners.
<b>Evaluation</b>	Reflective teachers should be able to assess learners in terms of a program's goals and objectives, to encourage learners to self-monitor and self-assess, and to evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching.

The purposes of this study are: 1) to describe and illustrate how Japanese student teachers of the English language become more aware of their teaching through reflection, and 2) to find out how they acquire and develop attitudes and skills essential for self-direction and self-control in teaching English. The data I describe here was collected in Japan in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodology course. The course is required of pre-service teacher-education programs, offering theories of teaching, language teaching methods and approaches, and a teaching practicum. The goal of the course is to provide multiple opportunities for student teachers to explore their own teaching. There were 47 student teachers, most of whom were juniors at the Japanese university.

The procedures for reflective teaching used in my class allow the teacher trainees to learn to teach by: writing teaching plans repeatedly, undergoing pre-service teaching practice in the classroom, having opportunities for peer observations, and having opportunities for self-observation. Although all of the procedures are important, the latter is emphasized most, because it strongly relates to reflection, a key component of teacher growth.

## 2. The Teaching Plan

The teaching plan is intended to help the student teachers organize lessons efficiently and effectively. The lesson planning enables them to create interesting and active lessons that are student-centred, lessons in which activities are based on authentic situations. It also guides them through the actual teaching experience by recording activities they would do and procedures they would follow.

## 2.1 Objective(s) of writing teaching plans repeatedly

To be accustomed to writing teaching plans, while constructing class content and preparing for practically conducting the class.

## 2.2 What a teaching plan needs to have

Teaching plans require a number of key elements, as follows:

1. Teaching goal or goals. (What do I want the student to learn?)
2. Procedures for reaching the goal(s). (How will this goal be reached? What activities will be used? What procedures will be followed?)
3. Teaching materials. (What materials will be used to help students reach the goal?)
4. A means to reflect on contents and conduct of the class. (How can I reflect on my teaching and classroom interaction? How can I explore my teaching behaviours?)
5. Allotted time. (How can I fully use the amount of time for each step in the lesson? The length of one lesson is 50 minutes).

The teaching plans the student teachers had to design were based on the actual English textbook used in the seventh grade in Japanese junior high schools. Their teaching plans were corrected and revised many times. The student teachers' comments about the writing of teaching plans relate to their stress-reduction effect and the assistance in decision making, for example:

By preparing well for the teaching through writing teaching plans repeatedly, I reduced my anxiety, and I did not feel nervous during the pre-service teaching practice.

I found lessons complex and dynamic in nature, to some extent unpredictable, and were characterized by constant change. Therefore I had to continuously make decisions that are appropriate to what happened during a lesson.

## 3. Pre-Service Teaching Practice

According to Rosenshine and Stevens (1986, p. 377), when teachers structure their lessons effectively, they:

- Begin a lesson with a short review of previous, prerequisite learning.
- Begin a lesson with a short statement of goals.
- Present new material in small steps, letting students practice after each step.
- Give clear and detailed instructions and explanations.
- Provide a high level of active practice for all students.
- Ask a large number of questions, check for student understanding, and obtain responses from all students.
- Guide students during initial practice.
- Provide systematic feedback and corrections.
- Provide explicit instruction and practice for seatwork exercises and, where necessary, monitor students during seatwork.

### 3.1 Objectives of pre-service teaching practice

The pre-service teaching practice has been designed with the following objectives:

1. To have teaching experiences based upon actual textbooks used for seventh-grade

- students in junior high schools.
2. To try adopting various teaching approach and methods, such as the Oral Method, the Oral Approach, TPR, GDM, the Cognitive Approach, the Communicative Approach, and the Natural Approach.
  3. To have teaching experiences in accordance with the teaching plan that each student teacher designed.

### **3.2 How to attain those objectives (The procedures of pre-service teaching practice)**

The seven teaching methods (Oral Method, Oral Approach, and so on) listed above are taught and demonstrated during the first few class sessions of an academic year. The students try out a couple of methods when they carry out teaching practice in 15-20-minute lessons. How they conduct a class is videotaped, and the fullest account of their teaching is obtained from an actual recording of it. They review the videotape by themselves after the teaching practice. By doing so, they are expected to find how they could improve how they conduct the class and teach more efficiently and effectively. Visual recording is a powerful instrument in the development of a student teacher's self-reflective competence.

### **3.3 How to conduct pre-service teaching practice**

Each student teacher is given an identical seventh-grade-class lesson to teach and has one week or more to prepare for teaching. While one student teacher plays the role of the teacher in the classroom, the rest of the student teachers (who actually are peers) play roles as seventh-grade students. At the same time, the "students" serve as observers of his/her teaching. Since peers play roles as if they were real seventh-grade students, they may raise their hands and ask questions if they think what is being taught is not understandable for seventh-grade students, or they may give the wrong answer intentionally. Those actions may be unexpected by the student teacher, and he/she needs to deal with them. Students are seated along opposite walls of the classroom. As noted above, lessons are taught within a 15-20-minute time frame.

The reflection process follows the teaching practice. Peers comment on the teaching and discuss positive and negative points on the activities, student teacher's attitudes, and other issues.

### **3.4 Student teachers' comments on pre-service teaching practice**

Student teachers commented on the unexpected events during their teaching practice and the need to deal with them in a reflective way, for example:

Even though I designed a detailed lesson in advance, I sometimes needed to modify it during the lesson.

I needed to handle the actual situation in a reflective way so as to meet many unexpected things that occurred.

In the actual teaching, many unexpected things did in fact occur. Even though student teachers designed the detailed lesson beforehand, they sometimes needed to stray from it during the lesson. For example, the activities they prepared did not work as well as they had predicted, and the interaction among the student teacher and students (peers) did not always match their expectations. These experiences made them realize that they need to handle the actual situation that they encounter in

their lesson in a reflective way, so as to build their skills to handle the unexpected. These experiences also taught them that it was advantageous to have alternative ideas on hand to use spontaneously in their teaching.

## 4. Peer Observations

Observation is a way of gathering information about teaching. Peer observations can be an excellent stimulus for professional development, both for the observer and the observed. The benefits of peer observation are to construct and reconstruct our own knowledge about teaching and thereby learn more about ourselves as teachers. According to Gebhard and Oprandy (1989, p. 36), the purposes of peer observation are as follows:

1. To evaluate teaching. The observers (other student teachers and I) evaluate the subjects to identify their strengths and weaknesses in teaching behaviour which they did not recognize by themselves.
2. To learn to teach. Student teachers can pick up the tricks of teaching when they observe other peers' teaching. They can also see teaching behaviour that should not be done in the classroom.
3. To learn to observe. Student teachers need to learn to collect, analyse, and interpret descriptions of teaching. Learning to observe well takes time, effort, and practice. Those who find interest in learning to observe can be more aware of teaching than those who do not learn how to observe.
4. To observe to become more self-aware. This is central to peer observations. The more student teachers observe and develop their teaching, the freer they become to make their own informed teaching attitudes, beliefs, and classroom practices.

Deciding how to record observations and concomitant interpretations is as important as deciding why, what, how, and when to observe. Good record keeping is essential for effective classroom evaluation. It is hard for teachers to remember the numerous important details of classroom life over time without recording them for later reference. Good record keeping helps teachers (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p. 85) do the following things:

1. Keep track of important information about student learning and effective instruction.
2. Form sound impressions of student achievement and progress.
3. Accurately identify persistent difficulties experienced by individual students.
4. Report student progress to other educational professionals and parents.
5. Assign grades to students, if and when required to do so.
6. Monitor, evaluate, and redesign instructional plans.

As described before, during the pre-service teaching practice, student teachers join an English class, acting both as students and as observers of their peer's teaching behaviours. They are so-called "participant observers," active participants in the setting they are observing, playing the roles of seventh-grade students. While participant observers take part in the classroom as students, they also take notes, draw sketches, use checklists, tally and write comments on behaviours, collect short dialogues, and code and analyse patterns of interaction in the classroom, from seventh-grade students' perspectives, using the "Observation Sheet."



#### 4.1 Objectives of peer-observations

The objectives of requiring the student teachers to participate in peer observations is for them:

1. To be exposed to diverse teaching methods adopted by their peers.
2. To critically observe their peers' teaching methods and find out the advantages and disadvantages of those methods.
3. To gather information about teaching.
4. To learn to teach.

#### 4.2 How to attain those objectives

Students observe their peers' teaching practice and answer sixteen questions on the Observation Sheet. Each of these questions is rated on a scale of 1-5 (1 being excellent). The questions are as follows:

1. Are the objectives of the class specific and concrete?
2. Do the objectives of the class match students' competencies?
3. Does each activity relate to the objectives of the class?
4. Is time allotted well for each procedure?
5. Does the student teacher react well to unexpected things?
6. Have the objectives of the class been accomplished when the class ends?
7. Are new materials introduced naturally?
8. Are new materials introduced relating to those the students have already used?
9. Are the student teacher's explanations clear?
10. Are the student teacher's questions clear?
11. Are the student teacher's questions varied?
12. Is the student teacher's asking of questions well-timed?
13. Are the student teacher's instructions clear?
14. Does the student teacher use the target language (English) well?
15. Are students encouraged to use English as much as possible?
16. Does the student teacher control the class (in the positive sense)?

The following student teacher's comment on peer observations suggests the objectives are being met:

Peer observations let us share various ideas and see teaching from others' perspectives.

### 5. Self-Observations

An essential element in self-evaluation and self-inquiry is some form of observation. As noted earlier, in mid-semester, every student teacher was required to teach a 15-20-minute pre-service teaching practice to classmates. Each lesson had to be videotaped, and each student teacher had to write a self-observation report. Making use of the videotape of the class, this report had to include a detailed description, an analysis of the teaching based on the collected descriptions by the peers from the Observation Sheet, interpretations of the teaching in relation to how the teaching provided (or failed to provide) opportunities for classmates to learn, and alternative ways the student teacher could teach aspects of the lesson.

The self-observation experiences had a great impact on their ways of viewing teaching. By videotaping and then describing their own teaching objectively, they had

a chance to view their teaching from different angles and notice what they could not see while teaching. Self-analysis on their own teaching behaviour was found to be very helpful. By watching the video of their teaching, the student teachers noticed patterns and tendencies in their teaching that they could not easily see before. Moreover, it generated fresh teaching ideas.

### 5.1 Objectives of self-observations

The objectives of self-observation were to allow the student teachers:

1. To look back on their own teaching practice.
2. To construct and reconstruct their own knowledge about teaching, thereby learning more about their teaching attitudes, beliefs, and classroom practices. (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999)

### 5.2 How to attain those objectives

After completing their pre-service teaching practice, student teachers answer 70 questions listed on the Reflective Sheet (see Appendix). They are encouraged to reflect on what they had been doing in their teaching. In order to answer the questions, it is necessary to look objectively at teaching and reflect critically on what they discover. In asking and answering questions, student teachers are in a position to evaluate their teaching and develop their teaching styles for change.

### 5.3 Student teachers' comments on self-observations

It is clear that the self-observation process caused the student teachers to reflect on their practice, for example:

I (a performer as a teacher) could identify my strengths and weaknesses in teaching behaviour, and become more self-aware.

Much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry.

Much of what happened in teaching is unknown to me.

The refreshment of looking back on my own teaching with an open mind gave me a chance to develop myself.

The self-observation experiences had a great influence on my view of teaching. By critically seeing my performance through videotape and then describing my own teaching objectively, I could see my teaching from different points of view and notice what I could not see while teaching.

## 6. Peer-Observations and Self-Observations

At the end of the course, 47 student teachers wrote reports on what they found through writing the Reflective Sheet, and how the peers' comments in the Observation Sheet proved useful.

### 6.1 Identifying important items through writing the Reflective Sheet

An analysis of the student teachers' reports indicated the areas they found of importance in the Reflective Sheet (Table 2).

**Table 2: Reflective Items Student Teachers Found Important**

Items	%*
1. The importance of preparation	74%
2. Teaching skills, e.g. "It's difficult for me to explain clearly."	48%
3. Weak points, lack of English proficiency, e.g. "By observing my lesson objectively, I knew what is needed, paid attention to."	48%
4. Contents of teaching	35%
5. Motivation to improve teaching skills and behaviours	35%
6. Reflection on what was done in the lesson	30%
7. Strong points	9%
8. Other, e.g. "By answering many questions in the Reflective Sheet, I can put my ideas in order."	9%

\* Proportion of students who found the item important

## 6.2 Identifying important items through peers comments

The student teachers' reports also indicated the areas of the Observation Sheet feedback they found useful (Table 3).

**Table 3: Items From Observation Sheets Student Teachers Found Useful**

Items	%*
1. Points in improving English skills and behaviours, e.g. "Through my peers' comments, I can find my weak points and see them objectively."	100%
2. Motivation to improve teaching skills and behaviours, e.g. "I am very happy that my peers praised my lesson. That makes me to feel like trying harder than before."	87%
3. The order of priority of what should be mended, e.g. "Since my weak points were pointed out by many peers, I can find what kind of weak points I should improve first."	35%
4. Different perspectives, e.g. "I can see my way of teaching from students' perspectives." "I can find different opinions from mine."	22%
5. Confirmation of what was done in the lesson, e.g. "I can know that what I did in my class was right, not wrong."	22%
6. Others, e.g. "One of my peers evaluate what I did in the class differently from other peers." "I feel the way of responding students is difficult." "I will keep Observation Sheet as a precious thing throughout my life."	48%

\* Proportion of students who found the item important

Most students said peers' comments enable them to feel more confident in assessing their effects on teaching and to become highly-motivated teachers-to-be. If teachers are actively involved in reflecting on what is happening in their own classrooms, they are in a position to discover whether there is a gap between what they teach and what their learners learn. Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.

## 7. Conclusion

The experience of the lesson planning, teaching practice, peer observations and self-observations allowed the student teachers to share a variety of ideas with one another and see teaching from others' perspectives. Moreover, it provided them as prospective teachers with meaningful insight into their future teaching and growth in experience.

In order to make progress in our teaching, we need to follow three steps: plan (lesson planning), perform (teaching practice), and reflect (peer observations and self-observations). Teachers tend to make light of the third step but it is self-observation that lets us consider our teaching objectively, find different ways of teaching, and design more contextually relevant lesson plans. Self-observation makes teacher exploration possible in a plan-perform-reflect cycle.

The process of reflecting upon student teachers' own teaching is viewed as an essential component in developing knowledge and theories of teaching. Reflection is therefore a key element in their professional development. This process will be one that continues throughout a teacher's career.

I hope that student teachers will have developed the essential attitude of reflection by the time they have begun teaching as real teachers.

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## Appendix: The Reflective Sheet (used after teaching practice)

Note: Figures in brackets show the ratio of student teacher responses

### Concerning preparation of the pre-service teaching practice

1. How was your preparation of the pre-service teaching practice?
  - a) harder than expected (26%)      hard (42%)
  - b) not hard (5%)      enjoyable (26%)
  - c) painful (0%)      other (1%)
2. How long did it take to prepare for the pre-service teaching practice?
3. Did you make a teaching plan for 15-20-minute teaching practice?  
Yes (72%)      No (28%)
4. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 3), to what did you pay attention when you made a teaching plan?
  - a) The teaching plan would be conducted within 15-20-minutes. (49%)
  - b) other (51%)
5. Those of you who answered 'no' in 3), what was the reason of not making the teaching plan?
  - a) I thought I could modify the teaching plan for 50-minute class even when unexpected things would occur. (40%)
  - b) others (60%)
6. Did you set up objectives of the class?  
Yes (88%)      No (12%)
7. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 6), what were they?
8. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 6), to what did you pay attention when you set up objectives?
9. Those of you who answered 'no' in 6), what was the reason of not setting up objectives of the lesson?
10. Did each activity relate with the objectives of the lesson?  
Yes (94%)      No (6%)
11. Were new materials introduced naturally?  
Yes (81%)      No (19%)
12. Were new materials introduced relating with the ones students have already learned?  
Yes (71%)      No (29%)
13. Was time of each procedure allotted well?  
Yes (94%)      No (6%)
14. Those of you who answered 'no' in 13), why not?
15. Did you decide utterances for questions or for direction in advance?  
Yes (80%)      No (20%)
16. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 15), what kinds of utterances were they?
17. Those of you who answered 'no' in 15), why not?
18. Did you plan to use English in the class as much as possible?  
Yes (65%)      No (35%)
19. Those of you who answered 'no' in 18), why not?
20. Did you plan that students encouraged to use English in the class as much as possible?  
Yes (81%)      No (19%)
21. Did you plan that students encouraged to do lots of oral practices?  
Yes (87%)      No (13%)
22. Did you plan that the lesson was learner-centered?  
Yes (82%)      No (18%)
23. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 22), what did you consider?
24. Did you make your original teaching materials?
  - a) picture-card (21%)      b) flash-card (40%)
  - c) a paper for exercise (26%)      d) others (13%)
25. How long did it take to make your original teaching materials?
26. Did you practice what you planned for pre-service teaching practice in advance?  
Yes (84%)      No (16%)

27. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 26), where and in what way did you practice?  
 a) I practiced by myself in front of the mirror (19%)  
 b) I let my friends check my way of teaching (21%)  
 c) others (27%)
28. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 26), to what did you pay attention when you practiced? (Plural responses are OK.)  
 a) the clarity of explanation (22%)      b) the clarity of questions (15%)  
 c) facial expressions (9%)              d) my eyes (9%)  
 e) volume of voice (18%)                f) time (20%)  
 g) others (7%)

### Concerning during pre-service teaching practice

29. Did you time the lesson (each activity)?
30. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 29), how did you react when your class did not go as you had expected?
31. Those of you who answered 'no' in 29), how did you react when your class did not go as you had expected?
32. Did you have anything unexpected or troublesome during the lesson?  
 Yes (56%)      No (44%)
33. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 32), what were they?
34. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 32), how did you react to them?
35. Did you conduct your class, freeing pressure?  
 Yes (45%)      No (55%)
36. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 35), why?
37. Those of you who answered 'no' in 35), why not?

### Concerning after pre-service teaching practice

38. Do you think the objectives of the class were clearly understood?  
 Yes (70%)      No (30%)
39. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 38), why not?
40. Did your objectives of the class match students' competencies?  
 Yes (86%)      No (14%)
41. Do you think your explanation was clear?  
 Yes (52%)      No (48%)
42. Those of you who answered 'no' in 41), how will you mend them?
43. Do you think your questions were clear?  
 Yes (80%)      No (20%)
44. Those of you who answered 'no' in 43), how will you mend them?
45. Do you think your questions were varied?  
 Yes (64%)      No (36%)
46. Those of you who answered 'no' in 45), how will you mend them?
47. Do you think timing of asking questions was good?  
 Yes (84%)      No (16%)
48. Those of you who answered 'no' in 47), how will you mend it?
49. Do you think your instruction was clear?  
 Yes (70%)      No (30%)
50. Those of you who answered 'no' in 49), how will you mend it?
51. Did you try to use English in the class as much as possible?  
 Yes (57%)      No (43%)
52. Those of you who answered 'no' in 51), how will you use English as much as possible?
53. Did you let students use lots of English?  
 Yes (75%)      No (25%)
54. Those of you who answered 'no' in 53), how will they do so?
55. Did you let students do lots of oral practice?  
 Yes (78%)      No (22%)
56. Those of you who answered 'no' in 55), how will they do so?
57. Was your class learner-centered?  
 Yes (71%)      No (29%)
58. Those of you who answered 'no' in 57), what kind of scenes were not learner-centered? How will those scenes become learner-centered?
59. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 27a), was the real class different from the ones which you practiced before pre-service teaching?  
 Yes (81%)      No (19%)

60. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 59), how was it different?
61. Do you feel that the preparation is very important?  
Yes (99%) No (1%)
62. What kind of impressions on pre-service teaching practice did you have before doing that? (Plural responses are OK.)  
a) looking forward to it (26%) b) scary (11%) c) anxious (44%)  
d) I did not want to undergo pre-service teaching practice (12%)  
e) others (7%)
63. Describe anything after undergoing pre-service teaching practice
64. Was your pre-service teaching practice successful?  
a) very good (4%) b) good (25%) c) average (42%)  
d) bad (25%) e) very bad (4%)
65. Why did you evaluate pre-service teaching practice as in 64)?

**Concerning writing on the blackboard**

66. Did you plan for writing the blackboard beforehand?  
Yes (67%) No (33%)
67. Those of you who answered 'yes' in 66), to what did you pay attention?
68. Those of you who answered 'no' in 66), why not?
69. What did you notice while writing on the blackboard?  
a) Writing letters is difficult (26%)  
b) I didn't know the size of the letters I should write (31%)  
c) I should have considered where to put a big vellum paper on the blackboard (6%)  
d) others (37%)
70. How do you think you should mend 69) a-d?

## **Part 5**

# **Self-Access Centres for Learner Autonomy**

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## Looking In and Looking Out: Managing a self-access centre

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### Abstract

Good self-access centres foster learner autonomy by providing a range of appropriate learning opportunities within the centre and by making the right connections to learning opportunities outside the centre. Self-access centre managers play a pivotal role in developing and maintaining these opportunities. This paper defines the complex role of a good self-access centre manager by looking at five key components of the role. The paper also illustrates a blurring of the boundaries of a self-access centre and suggests, consequently, that a manager's responsibilities extend further than before.

**Key words:** learner autonomy, independent learning, self-access centre, SAC, management, manager

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### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, a self-access centre (SAC) has been thought of as a physical location containing resources and providing opportunities for self-access learners (see, for example, MoE-NZ, 2010; Sheerin, 1989; Sturtridge, 1992). In this sense SACs may seem like relatively self-contained operations but in reality, and increasingly so in recent years, their physical boundaries have been blurred. Two major developments have contributed to the extension of SACs beyond their physical boundaries. They are the development of technology and the integration of self-access learning into taught courses.

The first, technological, development has increased the connectivity of SACs with the outside world and, along with the consequent blossoming of online resources for self-access learning, now allows a SAC's users to go (virtually) into the outside world and the outside world to come (virtually) into the SAC. In fact, connectivity has become so good that the "home students" might make fewer, or even no, physical appearances in the SAC because they choose to work from more convenient locations. The use of technology in self-access learning is not new but it is beginning to have an impact on how we think about SACs. This may lead to downsizing of the

physical space allocated to SACs and possibly the reconfiguration of resource allocation.

The second major cause of the blurring of SAC boundaries is the integration of self-access learning into taught courses (see, for example, Ciel Language Support Network, 2000; Fisher, Hafner, & Young, 2007; Gardner, 2007; Kjisik, 2007; Toogood & Pemberton, 2002). This is also not new although the attitude to it has changed significantly (Gardner & Miller, 2010). In fact, it might be argued that a desire to provide self-access facilities for classes was a starting point for many SACs. However, as a concern with learner autonomy enters into the mainstream of language teaching, as argued by Benson (2001), the link between taught courses and self-access learning is strengthened. This contributes to blurring the boundaries of SACs because their activities become an integral part of what students do on their courses.

As technology develops further and taught courses involve more self-access learning, the boundaries of SACs blur even further. This is simply a more accurate representation of the reality of self-access learning which has never been constrained. However, the blurring does create some management issues. SACs have become complicated operations to manage because they attempt to do all of the following:

1. Maintain a physical location which serves at least part of their user-group
2. Maintain virtual locations which serve their “home” user-group and another less clearly defined user-group
3. Direct (and sometimes connect) users to virtual locations maintained by other organisations
4. Serve: independent users; course-related users; and possibly users who fall into both groups
5. Provide: materials; technology; activities
6. Offer learners: advice, guidance, help, support
7. Integrate with a world-wide web of learning resources
8. Integrate with locally taught courses

In this paper I will first establish the role of a SAC and show an increasing blurring of its boundaries between physical and virtual locations. I will then examine in some detail the key components of the role of a good SAC manager. I will conclude by arguing that just as SACs extend beyond physical boundaries so does the role of SAC managers.

## 2. The Role of a Self-Access Centre

Within the literature there are descriptions of many self-access centres, for example: a report on SACs in South-East Asia (Miller, 1992); a detailed review of five tertiary level SACs in Hong Kong (Gardner & Miller, 1997); an extremely comprehensive review of approximately 80 SACs in Mexico (Chávez Sánchez, 1999); and a review of 22 SACs in New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong and England (Blaker & Burns, 2000). These reviews identify a number of common characteristics of SACs as well as some differences but, according to Morrison “there exists no coherent theory of how a SAC operates to support independent learning” (Morrison, 2006, p. 73) which, he suggests, make it impossible to answer the question “What is a SAC?” (ibid.).

Despite the lack of theory, the over-riding goal of a SAC, and one which is inherent in most SAC rationales and is agreed by Morrison (2006), is to support independent learning. I would argue this also implies an attempt to foster autonomous learning. With this strong focus on the learner, it is not surprising that the literature cited above reveals differences among the SACs reviewed. Responding to learners' individual needs is likely to create more diversity in the provision of learning opportunities than might be the case, for example, in taught courses. Indeed, recent research looking at the practices of 7 SAC managers has concluded that managers have "multifarious roles which vary from one institution to another" but also that there are common principles of SAC management (Gardner & Miller, 2011).

### 3. The Role of the Self-Access Centre Manager

The lack of a theory of SAC operation suggests that there will also be no specific theory of SAC management. Although this is largely true, there is a depth of literature in the wider fields of management and educational management which guides an understanding of how management is implemented in the more focused context of a SAC.

#### 3.1 Defining management

The verb "manage" came into English from Latin and originally had the meaning "handle" and quite specifically in some early uses it was related to handling horses (Online etymology dictionary, 2010). Probably at the time a person who could handle horses could handle most things. More recently the verb has taken the following more familiar meanings:

To direct or conduct business affairs  
To direct or control the use of; handle  
To exert control over  
To direct the affairs or interests of  
(The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2009)

be in charge of; run  
supervise (staff)  
administer and regulate (resources)  
(Compact Oxford dictionary, 2010)

White, Hockley, van der Horst Jansen, & Laughner (2008), in a summary of the literature on management, summarise the main management functions as: planning, organising, leading/motivating, and controlling. Their summary very neatly side-steps the on-going discussion in the educational management literature about differences between managing and leading in which the former is typically characterised as maintaining the system and the latter as moving forwards. The four main management functions of White et al. (2008) are clearly also to be expected of a good SAC manager who would apply them to achieve the goal of supporting independent learning and all that it implies.

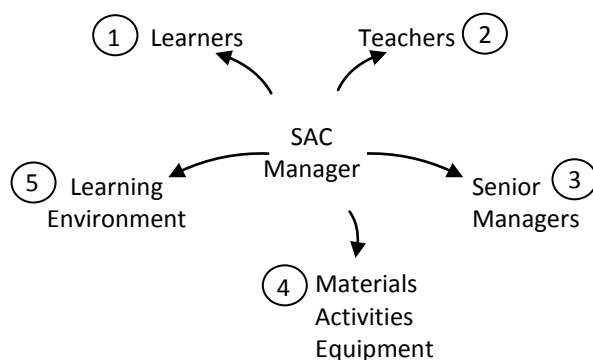
### 3.2 What a SAC manager manages

A SAC manager is responsible for achieving the primary goal of the SAC which entails optimising opportunities for independent learning. This is achieved by planning, organising, leading/motivating, and controlling resources (people and things) both inside and outside the SAC. So a SAC manager's job is not about "being in charge" but about maintaining optimum services (management) and making new things happen (leadership). This makes the role difficult because managers have to be good administrators who can organise many diverse resources but they also have to be good leaders because dealing with change (e.g. in learners' needs or availability of resources) requires innovation. Fortunately, almost every SAC manager I have met has had both those qualities but they have also all been overworked.

This paper does not discuss how to manage staff, students, facilities and resources in a SAC, as has been done elsewhere (see for example, Gardner & Miller, 1999); or evaluate the usefulness of SACs, which has also been done elsewhere (see for example, Beeching, 1996; Esch, 1989; Gardner, 1999, 2001; Gardner & Miller, 1997; Kafudji, North, & Finney, 1995; Lonergan, 1994; Morrison, 1999, 2002; Star, 1994); or even catalogue the diversity of materials and activities in SACs worldwide, which has certainly been done quite extensively (see for example, Blaker & Burns, 2000; Carvalho, 1993; Chávez Sánchez, 1999; Frankel, 1982; Gardner & Miller, 1997; Miller, 1992; Nunan, 1997; Poon, 1994; Race, 1985; Sinclair, 1996). The purpose of the paper is to identify tasks which can contribute to providing optimal self-access learning opportunities. These tasks, regardless of whether they are physically located within a SAC or outside it, are the components of the SAC manager's job. What I am really suggesting is that the SAC manager should more appropriately be thought of as the SALL manager because the focus is on promoting self-access learning wherever it happens rather than just managing the SAC itself. I am reluctant, however, to use the term SALL manager because the goal of promoting independence and autonomy necessarily implies that it is the learners who should be managing the learning. So, more accurately, I am proposing that the SAC manager is the manager of Providing Self-Access Learning Opportunities but as PSALO is a rather ugly acronym I shall continue to use the term SAC manager.

## 4. The Components of a SAC Manager's Job

The SAC manager's role seems at first glance to fall into the neatly divided components shown in Figure 1 but there is considerable overlap.



**Figure 1: Components of the SAC Manager's Role**

## 4.1 Dealing with learners

Dealing with self-access learners is more complicated than dealing with classroom learners. A class teacher might deal with beginners in one session and advanced level students in another; she might manage groupwork for one activity, pair-work for another and then provide a distance task for homework. A SAC manager needs to provide for all types of learner and all types of activity at the same time, and accommodate individual learner's goals. Table 1 illustrates how SACs need to be flexible because they cater for such wide ranges of potential users.

**Table 1: Dichotomies of Self-access Users**

Individuals	-	Groups
Standalone	-	Associated with a course
Regular	-	One-time only, or irregular
Experienced	-	New
Physical presence	-	Virtual presence
Members	-	Guests
Voluntary	-	Compelled
Beginners	-	Advanced

The SAC manager needs to provide learners with opportunities for: goal-setting, orientation, training in learning strategies, diagnostic tools, tools for planning, record-keeping, reflection, support and a range of learning materials and activities. Inevitably many of these tasks will need multiple approaches according to the type of learners. For example, it is a fairly common and useful practice to involve SAC first-time users in an orientation to give them a view of the breadth of services, facilities and materials available. However, if they are likely to be one-time-only users this seems like a potential waste of time and might be off-putting for the users. Equally, regular guest virtual users of a single online resource need only brief instructions not a whole orientation to a SAC which might be at a great distance from their physical location.

### The importance of identifying purpose

The most appropriate and effective service to users can only be provided if the user's purpose is clear at the outset. In the case of the virtual guest user of a single resource, the purpose may be assumed. In the case of a user who attends a course with integrated self-access the identification of purpose might be shifted to a course-based activity. Some users might not see a purpose as important but defining it might focus learning significantly and increase effectiveness. Where necessary, a SAC manager needs to find ways to help users identify their purpose. This can be done as part of an online or paper-based reflection, as a teacher-led discussion or in a small group or one-to-one consultation.

### Training for independence

Most new self-access learners, especially those who have not previously been encouraged to learn independently, need support in getting started. Typically, such training would include an orientation to available learning resources; awareness-

raising about learning strategies; a system for setting goals, planning and record-keeping; an introduction to diagnostic tools and approaches to self-assessment; and an explanation of the importance of constant reflection on learning.

It is likely, given the potential diversity of learners, that more than one possible pathway through training will be necessary. For example, standalone users might be given opportunities to attend training workshops, perhaps only selecting those parts of training they consider useful. Users who are members of SALL-integrated courses might receive all of their training as part of the course. Good SAC manager will make sure that training is appropriate and timely regardless of who provides it and in which context because good training is to the advantage of the self-access learners and promotes independent learning. Good SAC managers will make available a range of explanatory documents so that learners can refresh their understanding later. Managers will also provide templates of documents users may need for record-keeping. Ideally these documents can be supplied in a user-amendable electronic format so they can be customised to suit the individual needs and styles of learners.

### **Supporting pair- and group-work**

Most self-access learners adapt easily to following links to learning resources (either through catalogues or online searches) and using them because they are familiar with libraries and classroom learning. From their classrooms many learners are also familiar with the notion of learning in pairs or groups but may not be good at finding partners or organising groups because that has usually been done for them by teachers. Thus it is an important part of the SAC manager's role to provide systems and space for pair- and group-work. Systems can consist of notice boards, or their online equivalent, to enable learners to find partners with similar learning goals. These systems can have single dedicated goals like finding pen-friends or conversation partners, or they can have broader goals. Systems can be restricted to a particular set of learners grouped by language ability, location or membership of a particular community (e.g. the students of an institution) or they can be more open to encourage interaction with a wider spectrum of learners and can even include non-learners who might enter the system as mentors (e.g. alumni of the institution or members of the public). As potential entrance to a system widens, the SAC manager has to consider issues of security of the users.

In addition to enabling a system for finding partners, the SAC manager needs to make provision for a space in which pairs and groups can work in a way which is beneficial to them and not disruptive to others. This can be done by allocating a physical space within the institution, providing a virtual meeting space using appropriate technology or by suggesting suitable venues in which participants can meet actually or virtually.

It should not be assumed that providing a system and a place will be enough to encourage collaboration. It may also be necessary for the SAC manager to ensure participants receive guidance on how to: conduct specific activities, practice appropriate behaviour, benefit from collaborative work, assess progress and evaluate outcomes.

### **Supporting learners in self-access integrated classes**

While SAC managers may not be specifically responsible for taught courses with an integrated self-access component, it makes sense for them to take responsibility for

supporting that component so they can contribute to its development and focus. Good SAC managers will assist with providing learner training materials and may organise special activities for students in taught courses. SAC managers will have a better knowledge of resources available to a particular group of students and may have a fuller understanding of self-access learning.

### **Supporting experienced self-access learners**

A lot of focus in SACs may go into inducting and supporting new users. However, the more experienced users should not be forgotten because they deserve attention as “best customers”. Experienced users probably continue using self-access for one or more of the following reasons:

- They find it useful
- They enjoy working independently
- They recognise continuing need for improvement
- An ulterior motive (e.g. a place to relax, nothing else to do)

However, experienced users also need support or recognition of their efforts. A good SAC manager will want to be able to identify experienced users and offer them additional support. Perhaps, an experience sharing session can be offered only to experienced users, or they can be given a chance to receive feedback on their progress. Many experienced users also welcome a chance for one-to-one language practice with a teacher.

## **4.2 Dealing with teachers**

The SAC manager has an important role to play with three groups of teachers: those whose job involves part- or full-time work related to self-access learning; those who teach on courses with a self-access component; and those who have no involvement with self-access.

The teachers with a commitment to self-access clearly understand the benefits but may need leadership depending on how experienced they are. New members of staff in this category will need training to: understand the goals of self-access, produce appropriate learning materials, conduct activities and become learning advisors. Most new members will probably have worked previously, or continue to work, as classroom teachers. In some cases this creates a hurdle that SAC managers have to help staff overcome. Classroom teaching tends to produce teachers who are good at moving a large group of learners forward at a relatively even pace in line with a syllabus and a reasonably common goal. In some teaching contexts the most important skills are about discipline and control which become unimportant in supporting self-access but are, for some teachers, difficult to leave behind. An important focus in training new SAC staff must be to help them see the importance of shifting the locus of control to the learner and incorporating choice and opportunities for reflection in materials and activities.

Another role of the SAC manager is to cooperate with all SAC staff to ensure they are working towards the same common goals. This can be achieved by staff group discussions which can reveal uncertainties. Applied group research projects are also a useful way a good SAC manager can focus staff attention on important areas of development for the benefit of learners.

Teachers who teach on a course with an integrated self-access component but who have no other direct involvement with self-access need the SAC manager's attention. Such teachers might not be wholeheartedly committed to self-access learning or they may understand very little about it. The SAC manager can work with the coordinator of the course or directly with the teachers to provide them with training about: self-access learning, its goals and benefits; the facilities and resources available; what can be expected of the SAC manager and other self-access related staff; what is expected of the course teachers; motivating students; and monitoring learning. In exchange the course teachers can supply the SAC manager with a clearer picture of the goals of the course and why self-access learning has been integrated into it.

Dealing with teachers who have no involvement with self-access learning can be a challenging part of a SAC manager's role and is one it may be tempting to ignore. However, if those teachers have any influence over students, other teachers or managers it is important to make sure they understand the importance of self-access learning. Good SAC managers will want to present an overview of their work to all colleagues and explain the benefits to students.

### **4.3 Dealing with senior managers**

SAC managers report to more senior managers within their institutions. Establishing a relationship with those managers is essential because they have ultimate control over the existence of the SAC. SAC managers need to present justifications to senior managers in order to get and keep funding. Good SAC managers do this by showing how the goals of the SAC are beneficial for the learners and in line with the goals of the institution. Wherever possible, good SAC managers ensure that positive decisions about the SAC and self-access learning are incorporated into policy documents so the agreements are durable and binding.

A SAC manager must report progress to senior managers and this essentially requires a demonstration of efficiency and effectiveness. Managers often report numerical data related to usage but, while useful, such statistics do not contribute directly to demonstrating the effectiveness of a SAC which can only be shown by showing the SAC is meeting its goal of promoting learner independence. One approach is to run regular user surveys to ascertain changes in perceptions of and attitudes to learning and independence. Another approach is to relate the use of self-access learning to learning gain but caution is needed because there are many overlapping influences on learning gain any or all of which can be credited as the causes of success. A longitudinal study would be more reliable, for example, looking at learners 10 years after completing their studies to see whether they have continued to be independent learners. One other measure that can be used to demonstrate effectiveness to senior managers is an investigation of changes in learning strategies. As these are fairly discrete and relatively easy to identify they can be monitored before and after a period of self-access as a way of showing evolution as an independent learner.

### **4.4 Dealing with materials, activities and equipment**

A SAC manager has to ensure that self-access learners have access to: learner training materials and workshops; diagnostic tools suitable for their language levels and goals; self-assessment tools; pathways through existing materials; resources suitable for individual and group modes of learning; packages targeting specific courses with integrated self-access components; language advising; support mechanisms; the necessary technology; and a safe study environment. This is a large job description



for what is only one part of a SAC manager's job. Fortunately, in most contexts assistance is provided by teachers, clerks and technicians.

In making decisions about learning materials and activities, SAC managers have to consider many things. By frequently reviewing the stock of materials and activities on offer and, by asking the questions in Table 2, managers are able to map their decisions to users' needs and wants as a way of maintaining optimum services.

**Table 2: Management Decisions about Materials and Activities**

Consideration	Decisions to Be Made
Language level	What range is needed? Are existing materials/activities too difficult? Are learners being sufficiently challenged?
Access	Are restrictions needed on access to any of the materials or activities? Should in-house materials be made universally available via the internet?
Student needs and wants	Which language skills are students assessed on? What do students want to use the target language for? What are students' interests?
Appropriacy (in terms of age and culture)	What is the age range among users? Does the SAC manager have a pastoral duty to limit access to certain topics? Are there cultural taboos on certain materials?
Scaffolding	To what extent do materials have self-access support incorporated? Is additional support required?
Authenticity	What range is needed of authentic and supported materials/activities? Can support be added to authentic materials? Can technology be used to enhance access to authentic language sources?
Reliance on technology	Do materials/activities need specific hardware? What happens if it stops working? Is technology-based learning more or less popular? Is technical support available?
Staff capability	Are staff able to produce materials in-house? Are staff trained to run self-access activities?
Staff load	Are sufficient staff available for the activities? Are sufficient staff hours available for in-house production of materials?
Support	Is there sufficient availability of teachers for language advising? Has support been added to difficult materials?
Cost	Are desired materials/activities within budget? Is the cost justified?

An important consideration in relation to equipment is that it can change the way self-access learning takes place not only in the sense of where and when but also how. For example, the internet allows self-access users to access materials and some activities from entirely different physical locations and at any time they choose (where and when). But much more importantly, the internet gives unprecedented opportunities for self-access learning from exposure to authentic language in a way that could not have been attempted without it (how). New technologies tend to be popular with young learners and are sometimes less popular with teachers. But because technologies often enhance self-access learning they need to be investigated. A good SAC manager will personally, or by proxy, stay on top of emerging technology in order to apply it quickly and to the best effect.

#### **4.5 Dealing with the learning environment**

It is a SAC manager's responsibility to ensure a pleasant and safe learning environment regardless of whether learners are physically or virtually located within the SAC. Definitions of a pleasant environment may be culturally bound but should include at least a comfortable environment, ease of access to facilities and an atmosphere conducive to learning. Good SAC managers often put considerable effort into finding ways of making learners comfortable by providing more comfortable furniture or arranging social events for learners. Entering the Self-Access Centre at the City University of Hong Kong, for example, feels like entering the lounge of an exclusive club whereas many other self-access centres feel more like a sterile hospital ward. A particularly spectacular example of design to make users feel at home in a self-access centre can be seen at Kanda University in Chiba, Japan where layout, furniture, decorations and staff all contribute to a warm friendly feeling. Of course SAC budgets are constraining but good SAC managers will do what they can to make users feel welcome.

A safe environment is one in which the learners are not put at risk. The safety of physical locations is often managed by the institution through control of access and monitoring of premises. Encouraging "outsiders" to come in and "insiders" to go outside for SAC activities (physically or virtually) increases learning opportunities but can increase risk levels. Benefits frequently outweigh risks but good SAC managers will be aware of the risks and assess them in relation to the users of their SAC.

### **5. Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has not been to produce a manual for managing a self-access centre which would be futile in such a short space. Rather it has been an attempt to look at the components of the role of the SAC manager. In doing this I have focused on what I see as five major components and for each of them I have highlighted in some detail the tasks a good SAC manager performs in those areas. A summary of those tasks appears in Table 3.

In conclusion, it is clear that a good SAC manager must be a very busy person with such a wide range of tasks which are all geared towards serving the fundamental goal of promoting independent learning. I have argued that a SAC manager's role inevitably extends beyond the physical boundaries of the SAC and that only by looking out from the SAC as well as looking into the SAC can we see the full extent of the role of a good SAC manager.

**Table 3: What a Good SAC Manager Does**

<p><b>1. In dealing with learners a good SAC manager will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• find ways to help users identify their purpose in using self-access learning</li> <li>• ensure that training for independence is appropriate and timely and is accompanied by useful documentation</li> <li>• provide systems and space for pair- and group-work; and guidance on how to participate and benefit from it</li> <li>• provide learner training materials for use with students of taught courses</li> <li>• identify experienced users and offer them additional support</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. In dealing with teachers a good SAC manager will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• help new staff see the importance of learner control, choice and reflection</li> <li>• ensure all SAC staff are working to common goals</li> <li>• provide training for teachers of courses with a self-access component</li> <li>• present to all colleagues an overview of their work and the benefits to students</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. In dealing with senior managers a good SAC manager will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensure that positive decisions about the SAC and self-access learning are incorporated into policy documents so the agreements are durable and binding</li> <li>• report progress to senior managers by demonstrating a combination of efficiency and effectiveness</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. In dealing with materials, activities and equipment a good SAC manager will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensure that self-access learners have access to a wide and relevant range of resources, training and equipment</li> <li>• map materials and activities to users' needs and wants to evaluate service</li> <li>• stay on top of emerging technology</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. In dealing with the learning environment a good SAC manager will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop a comfortable, friendly and welcoming atmosphere</li> <li>• be aware of the risks of open access activities</li> </ul>

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## Evaluating Learning Gain in a Self-Access Centre

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### Abstract

Previous research suggests that the issue of learning gain is crucial to any discussion of Self-Access Centre (SAC) evaluation. However, Morrison (2005b) points out that there is no research-based framework specifically developed for evaluating the effectiveness of SAC. He suggests looking to the learners to identify evidence of learning gain. This study adopts a learner-centred approach to evaluating the learning gain in a SAC. Quantitative data were collected from pre- and post-questionnaires while qualitative data were collected from learner portfolios, learners' written reflections, two individual collaborative evaluation meetings and the language advisor's evaluation. All participants perceived themselves as having learning gains which include metacognitive knowledge and strategies, language gain and socio-affective gain. This study discovered some factors which are conducive to evaluating learning gain in a SAC: learners must be given the central role in the evaluation process; support and guidance must be provided for learners; and different learner-centred evaluation tools can be used. It is clear that evidence of learning gain in a SAC cannot be sought by traditional types of language assessments. A better alternative is learners' self-assessments based upon perceptual rather than objective data.

**Key words:** evaluation, self-access language learning, self-access centre, learning gain, learner-centred, metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive strategies, Hong Kong tertiary students

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### 1. Introduction

In the past few decades, the focus of language learning has changed from teacher-centred to learner-centred and this has involved a “reflective and less prescriptive approach to language teaching with learners taking more responsibility for their own learning” (Morrison, 2008, p. 124). The learner-centred approach has had some influence on the Hong Kong education system. Self-access learning has gained considerable ground in tertiary and institutional contexts (Gardner & Miller, 1997, 1999; Morrison, 1996) in Hong Kong and has also expanded to secondary schools in the last decade (Miller, Tsang, & Hopkins, 2007) as part of a curriculum reform which focuses on “building learner capabilities for independent and life-long learning” (CDC, 2000). Many self-access centres (SAC) have been set up to provide

resources but although considerable investments are often made in these, their evaluation is generally seen as one of the key challenges (Champagne et al., 2001; Gardner & Miller, 1999; M. W. C. Lai, 2007; Morrison, 2005a, 2005b; Thomson, 1996). Morrison (2005a) states that “Unlike other educational entities where evaluation has been recognized as an essential element in their development, there has been little systematic evaluation of SACs” (p. 267). Similarly, Gardner (2002) contends that “evaluation has taken a back seat in the development of self-access language learning” (p. 48). The limited research on SAC evaluations has mainly focused on SAC operation with little attention to the key area of learning gain.

Some research on evaluating learning gain in SACs was conducted in the 1990s (Davies, Dwyer, Heller, & Lawrence, 1991; Klassen, Detaramani, Lai, Patri, & Wu, 1998) at an early stage in their development and may not truly reflect the current situation. Moreover, that research focuses on evaluating learning outcome without examining the self-access language learning (SALL) process. This is unfortunate since learners are the primary stakeholders in SACs and examining their learning process may show how to better enhance learning gain.

The case study described here addresses this gap in the research by investigating learners’ *perceptions* of learning gain in terms of: development of language learning strategies; language gain; and confidence and motivation in language learning after using the SAC. Quantifiable measurement of learning gain was not the major method employed in this study because: it is difficult in practice to get quantifiable evidence of learning gain due to the uniqueness of learners’ goals; previous studies show that pre-test/post-test methodology produces insignificant results (Klassen, et al., 1998); and quantitative methods cannot measure confidence, motivation and independent learning skills which are essential elements of SALL learning gain.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Why SACs should be evaluated

Evaluation of SACs is crucial to their future development for pedagogical and financial reasons (2005a). Pedagogically, evaluation is developmental. Financially, successful evaluation secures funding. Without evidence that SACs provide an effective and efficient complement to traditional classroom learning, SACs are only an “act of faith” (Sinclair, 1999, p. 107).

### 2.2 Difficulties in evaluating SACs

Despite the fact that many researchers (Gardner, 1999, 2002; Gardner & Miller, 1997; Morrison, 1999, 2002, 2005b; Sinclair, 1999) have recognized the importance of evaluating SACs, evaluation is generally seen as difficult (Champagne, et al., 2001; Gardner & Miller, 1999; J. Lai, 2001; Morrison, 2005a, 2005b; Thomson, 1996). Gardner (2002) identifies specific aspects of SACs that make SAC evaluation difficult including: the complexity and uniqueness of SACs; the difficulty of data collection and analysis and the practical difficulties in measurement.

### 2.3 Existing research on evaluating SACs

One objective of a large-scale study of Hong Kong SACs was to determine the effectiveness of SACs in promoting learning. One significant conclusion was:

SACs need to explore more creative ways of measuring and of describing effectiveness instead of relying on number-counts and dubious use of statistics. It is essential to have cross-referencing between users' and tutors' perceptions of effectiveness (Gardner & Miller, 1997, p. 122)

The most significant contribution to SAC evaluation has been made by Morrison's (2005a) two theoretical constructs: SAC mapping and an evaluation framework. The SAC mapping clearly outlines all of the constituent elements, and the interaction between these and the learner. It serves as a focal point for an evaluation that attempts to capture the common essence of SACs. The evaluation framework serves to represent a flexible and context-adaptable evaluation environment that can be adapted to meet the needs of an evaluation of any SAC (Morrison, 2005a). Other SAC evaluative research focuses on learning gain (Davies, et al., 1991; Gremmo, 1988; Henner-Stanchina & Riley, 1978; Klassen, et al., 1998), learner strategies (Farmer, 1994; Gremmo, 1988; Kwan, 2002) and learner and teacher attitudes to self-directed learning (Clemente, 2001; Detaramani & Chan, 1996).

Learning gain is an important focus of SAC evaluation but it is difficult to evaluate in practice. Morrison (2005a, 2005b) identifies three major difficulties in the evaluation of learning gain in SACs including: the diverse user body; multiple uncontrollable variables; and the impact on the learning process.

Some attempts have been made at evaluating learning gain among self-access learners. A case history approach used by Henner-Stachina and Riley (1978) focused specifically on individual learners' success in the learning of individual language items. Gremmo's (1988) results showed perceptions of linguistic success but little impact on independent learning skills. With a more classical design of experimental and control groups and using pre- and post-tests to compare self-access learners with other learners, Klassen et al. (1998) found no significant difference. The improvement experienced by both groups could have been caused by any number of variables beyond the scope and control of the research.

The extensive variables impacting on self-access learning make the evaluation of learning gain problematic.

## 2.4 Possible ways of evaluating learning gain in SACs

Morrison (2005a) argues that using learners' perceptions of gain is an acceptable way of formulating a picture of gain in a context where large-scale, objective data will never be relevant, or available. He suggests useful evaluative instruments are: learning diaries, tests, learner portfolios, learner focus groups, learner self-introspection and regular learner-teacher review meetings. These tools are intensely learner-focused. Other researchers have also suggested evaluative approaches based on learners' self-perception and self-assessment of their development (Champagne, et al., 2001; J. Lai, 2001; Morrison, 2005a, 2005b; Mynard, 2004; Sinclair, 1999).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants in the study

The participants in this study were six students from three different faculties in a university in Hong Kong. Three of them were Higher Diploma students while the



other three were Bachelor degree students. They were motivated to improve their English and showed interest in self-access language learning, but they had not had any experience of self-access language learning (SALL) in the institution's Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL). In order to eliminate the effect of extraneous variables, all the participants in the study did not attend other English classes while participating. Since SALL is not integrated into the curriculum, students access the CILL on a voluntary basis in their own time.

### 3.2 Data collection

Data were collected by both qualitative and quantitative approaches through pre- and post-questionnaires, and learner contracts, learner portfolios, learners' written reflections, two individual collaborative evaluation meetings and the language advisor's evaluations of learners. The stages of data collection are shown in Table 1. Cross-referring between the sources of data provides a form of triangulation. Some data also helps situate the study (in keeping with the research methodology explained by Denzin, 1970, 1997).

**Table 1: Stages of Data Collection**

Stage	Timing	Data collection processes
Stage 1	Mid-March 2009	Individual meeting with the learners Conducted needs analysis Set language learning goals Signed the learner contract Completed the pre-questionnaire
Stage 2	Mid-April 2009	1st Collaborative evaluation meeting Evaluated learning progress by looking at the learner portfolio and the record of work Discussed the questions Negotiated the learning plan for the following weeks
Stage 3	Mid-May 2009	2nd Collaborative evaluation meeting Evaluated learning progress by looking at the learner portfolio (language learning evidence, the record of work and written reflections) Discussed the questions Discussed the language advisor's evaluation report) Remarks: Participants submitted the learner portfolio and the post-questionnaire to the researcher one week before the 2nd collaborative evaluation meeting to ensure: learners' self-evaluation in the written reflections were not influenced by the language advisor's evaluation report and the researcher would have time to read the learner portfolio and prepare the evaluation reports before the meeting.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Questionnaire data was analysed by calculating the mean scores of learners' responses and comparison of individual learner's responses to the questionnaire

items in the pre- and post-questionnaires. Positive and negative changes were identified. The qualitative data were transcribed, coded, categorised and summarised. This procedure served as a process of data reduction resulting in a set of concepts and common themes emerging from the data and categorised according to the research questions.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Learners perception of learning gain

Learners' perceptions of learning gain can be classified as:

1. Gain in metacognitive knowledge and strategies
2. Language gain
3. Socio-affective gain
  - a. Confidence in English language learning
  - b. Motivation in English language learning
  - c. Learners' relationships with the significant others

#### Gain in metacognitive knowledge and strategies

Data on metacognitive knowledge and strategies are associated with the items in Table 2. Clearly, by the end of the study all participants have a better awareness of metacognitive knowledge and strategies in language learning. The smallest increase was in item 3 which suggests planning is least important to the learners.

**Table 2 Learners Metacognitive Knowledge and Strategies**

	<b>Part I – Learners' metacognitive knowledge and strategies in language learning</b>	<b>Pre-questionnaire (mean score)</b>	<b>Post-questionnaire (mean score)</b>
1.	I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	2.16	3.16
2.	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	2.5	3.5
3.	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	2.66	2.83
4.	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	2.83	3.33
5.	I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	2.5	3.5
6.	I think about my progress in learning English.	2.33	3.0
<b>Overall mean score:</b>		<b>2.49</b>	<b>3.22</b>

Likert Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree, 4= Strongly agree

Learners' comments about improved independent language learning strategies were also observed in the learners' written reflections in the learner portfolio and in the collaborative evaluation meetings. There were numerous instances of metacognitive knowledge in their writings and their responses in the meetings. All six learners showed increased awareness of metacognitive knowledge (person, task and strategic

knowledge) and metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring and evaluating) in their self-reported data. Table 3 shows the types of knowledge statements occurring in the data collected from the six learners' written reflections, record of work and collaborative evaluation meetings. As shown in the table, statements of strategic knowledge were most numerous while statements of task knowledge were least numerous.

**Table 3: Types of Knowledge Statements**

Types of knowledge	Person knowledge	Task knowledge	Strategic knowledge
Number of statements	19	14	23
Percentage	34%	25%	41%

The increase in learners' strategic knowledge was also shown in questionnaire responses. While four learners agreed that they tried to find out how to be a better learner of English (item 2) in the pre-questionnaire, it is encouraging to find that all learners strongly agreed or agreed with the statement in the post-questionnaire. The mean score of responses to this item increased from 2.5 (pre-questionnaire) to 3.5 (post-questionnaire), indicating that learners became more aware of the importance of the strategies needed for a better learner of English. Instances of person knowledge, strategic knowledge, task knowledge and transfer of learning in learners' writings and responses are shown in the following examples:

**Learner E:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

It (SALL) can let me know which learning method is suitable or not suitable for me. And I understand how to select materials that are suitable for me. I also understand my weaknesses and which areas I need to improve in my learning'

**Learner A:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

I am more aware of the different approaches in language learning. I can try different approaches when I conduct self-access language learning.

According to Cotterall (2009), exploring development in the metacognitive knowledge base of second language learners is an important issue in prompting learner autonomy. This is because metacognitive knowledge is "a prerequisite for the self-regulation of learning. It informs *planning* decisions taken at the outset of learning and the *monitoring* processes that regulate the completion of a learning task. It also provides the criteria for *evaluation*" (Wenden, 1998, p. 528).

Despite the fact that only two learners increased their score for item 3, four learners reported having better ability in planning their own learning in the collaborative evaluation meetings. Here is an example of such comments:

**Learner C:** (Written reflections)

I have learned the importance of multitasking and how to organize my jobs well... I should not be too aggressive to finish too many tasks within a short period of time, then I can achieve the goals more easily.

Data in the study show that learners acknowledged the importance of goal-setting. While only three learners agreed that they had clear goals for improving English skills (item 5) in the pre-questionnaire, all the six learners agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in the post-questionnaire. This corresponds with the learners' comments on goal-setting in their written reflections and collaborative evaluation meetings. Although only three learners thought that they had completely achieved their goals at the end of the research period, all six acknowledged the value of goal-setting in the SALL process. Here is an example:

**Learner E:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

At first, I thought it was silly to set myself goals, but later I found that the goals can give me clearer directions for my learning. I understand the aims of my learning and I can plan my schedule better after knowing what language areas I want to focus on.

Goal-setting in language learning is commonly regarded as a metacognitive strategy promoting learner autonomy (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Wenden, 1991; Yang, 1998). According to Wenden (1991), the stronger the self-efficacy beliefs, the more challenging learners' learning goals will be and the more intensely they will seek to overcome obstacles to learning. Moreover, the sense of self-satisfaction arising from achieving goals indicates that goals are important elements of motivation (Bandura, 1997). Accordingly, it can be concluded that learners' positive attitudes towards goal-setting will give them positive motivation for SALL.

Monitoring and evaluating own learning are two other crucial metacognitive strategies. Despite the significant increase in learners' awareness of these two strategies as shown in items 1 and 6 in the questionnaire (Table 2), all learners commented in the collaborative evaluation meetings that they found it difficult to evaluate and reflect on their own learning progress. All learners shared similar views on this, for example:

**Learner D:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

When you (the researcher) ask me about my learning progress, I really don't know how to answer. I can only tell you how many exercises I have done and show you my portfolio, but I actually don't know how much I have learned. I really don't know...

In fact, this issue was also mentioned in the language advisor's evaluation reports of different learners. The above findings may suggest that raising learners' awareness was probably only the initial step in promoting autonomy. Learners should also be equipped with the strategies and skills needed to enable them to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. Moreover, in line with suggestions in the existing research on assessing learner autonomy (Champagne, et al., 2001; Cooker, 2009; Dickinson, 1987; Gardner, 2000; J. Lai, 2001; Mynard, 2004, 2006; Sinclair, 1999), the findings in this study suggest that evaluating learners' metacognitive awareness was not a fully reliable way to reflect the degree of learner autonomy achieved in learners. This is because learners may possess the knowledge and awareness, but they may not have the capacity to articulate autonomy. Some disjunction between learners' metacognitive knowledge and their ability to put it into practice was identified.

### Language gain

Data relating to language gain is from items 7-11 in the questionnaires (Table 4). Although the overall mean score increased from 1.46 (pre-questionnaire) to 1.99 (post-questionnaire), learners' self-efficacy in overall English proficiency remained low (item 7). It is interesting to find that all learners reported gain in at least two of the four skills and two learners even reported gain in three of the four skills, yet only one learner reported gain in overall English proficiency (item 7). However, learners' low self-efficacy in overall English proficiency may not mean that they had minimal language gain in the SAC. According to their responses in the post-questionnaire, all of them perceived themselves making improvement in some of the sub-skills. The results were also substantiated by the data collected from the learners' written reflections and the collaborative evaluation meetings. Four learners have stated in their written reflections that they experienced language gain after using the SAC, and all learners gave examples of language gain in the collaborative evaluation meetings. For example:

**Learner B:** (Written reflections)

After working on some grammar exercises on sentence structures, I can use more varieties of sentence structures in my writing.”

**Learner D:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

The Help Desk teacher told me the mistakes I made in my writing. After that, I know why I'm wrong and I will never make the same mistake again.

**Table 4: Learners' Self-efficacy in Language Proficiency**

	<b>Part II- Learners' self- efficacy in English proficiency</b>	<b>Pre-questionnaire (mean score)</b>	<b>Post-questionnaire (mean score)</b>
7.	My standard of English is	1.66	1.83
8.	The level of my speaking skills is	1.16	1.66
9.	The level of my listening skills is	1.5	2
10.	The level of my writing skills is	1.33	2.33
11.	The level of my reading skills is	1.66	2.16
<b>Overall mean score:</b>		<b>1.46</b>	<b>1.99</b>

Likert scale: 1= Poor, 2= Fair, 3= Good, 4= Very Good

In terms of the language gain in the sub-skills, it was found that five learners gave a higher score to their level of writing skills in the post-questionnaire. The improvement was less obvious in speaking, listening and reading skills according to questionnaire responses. The written reflections and collaborative evaluation meetings also showed similar results. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, four of the six learners set goals relating to writing skills. Therefore, they concentrated more on writing in the SALL process. Secondly, learners gave their writing to the language advisor and the SAC teachers for feedback. Therefore, they received more concrete evidence for language gain in writing compared to the rather vague and unquantifiable learning outcomes of listening and speaking.

### Socio-affective gain

Data on learners' confidence in English language learning are associated with items 12-17 in the questionnaires (Table 5). The overall mean score increased significantly from 1.99 (pre-questionnaire) to 2.86 (post-questionnaire), indicating that learners were generally more confident in English language learning. The most significant changes were found in items 13, 15 and 17. Responses to item 13 indicate that five of the six learners became more confident in finding an effective way to learn English. It is also encouraging to find that all the learners were confident or extremely confident that they could learn English independently outside the classroom (item 15). Learners also indicated confidence in selecting suitable materials/activities for independent language learning (item 17). In the language advisor's evaluation report, all learners were also observed to have increased confidence in English language learning and in using English to express ideas.

**Table 5: Learners' Confidence in English Language Learning**

	<b>Part III- Learners' confidence and motivation in English language learning</b>	<b>Pre-questionnaire (mean score)</b>	<b>Post-questionnaire (mean score)</b>
12.	How confident are you that you have the ability to learn English successfully?	2.33	2.83
13.	How confident are you that you can find an effective way to learn English?	1.83	3.0
14.	How confident are you that you can plan your learning on your own?	1.83	2.5
15.	How confident are you that you can learn English independently outside the classroom?	2.33	3.33
16.	How confident are you that you can test yourself to see how much you have learned?	2.0	2.5
17.	How confident are you that you can select suitable materials/ activities for independent language learning?	1.66	3.0
<b>Overall mean score:</b>		<b>1.99</b>	<b>2.86</b>

Likert scale: 1 (Not confident at all) ----> 4 (Extremely confident)

In the literature, learners' confidence correlates with academic success and the capacity for autonomy. Cotterall (1995) states that 'confident' is a defining characteristic of autonomous learners. Similarly, Wenden (1991) claims that without confidence in their ability to learn successfully, learners cannot develop autonomous approaches to learning. The findings therefore have some positive implications for developing autonomous learning in this group of learners. They were confident about language learning and self-regulation even though they had low self-efficacy in overall English proficiency. This may imply that learners with low self-efficacy do not necessarily have less capacity in developing autonomy.

Learners also stated in the written reflections and collaborative evaluation meetings that they were more confident in using English to express their ideas, here is an example:

**Learner C:** (Written reflection)

I have increased my confidence in spoken English. I now become braver than before. I do not feel uncomfortable when communicating with foreigners or travellers.

Two other learners commented in the collaborative evaluation meetings that they became more confident in using English because they were less afraid of making mistakes, for example:

**Learner B:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

Although I don't think my English has improved a lot, I am now more willing to try and became less afraid of making mistakes. Through making mistakes, I learned more.

**Motivation**

Data on learners' motivation are associated with items 18-25 in the questionnaires (Table 6). The overall mean score of learners' responses increased from 2.91 (pre-questionnaire) to 3.37 (post-questionnaire), indicating that learners generally became more motivated in English language learning after using the SAC. However, it is noteworthy that this was the lowest overall increase among all the sections in the questionnaire. This is because there were no significant changes in learners' responses to items relating to extrinsic motivation (items 21, 23 and 25) which started strong and remained strong.

**Table 6: Learners' Motivation in English Language Learning**

	<b>Part III- Learners' motivation and confidence in English language learning</b>	<b>Pre-questionnaire (Mean score)</b>	<b>Post-questionnaire (Mean score)</b>
18.	I am motivated to learn English	3.0	3.83
19.	I am motivated to find suitable materials for learning English outside class.	2.5	2.83
<b>Why do you learn English?</b>			
20.	Because learning English is fun.	2.0	2.5
21.	I want to get higher grade in English module.	3.16	3.33
22.	For the satisfaction I feel when I am in the process of accomplishing difficult language activities.	2.66	3.33
23.	In order to find a high-paying job later.	3.83	3.83
24.	I experience pleasure and satisfaction when learning new things about English.	2.5	3.5
25.	Because learning English will improve my competence in my future career.	3.66	3.83
<b>Overall mean score:</b>		<b>2.91</b>	<b>3.37</b>

Likert scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree, 4= Strongly agree

Learners' responses to items 23 and 25 in the questionnaires show that all learners strongly believed that high English proficiency can improve their competency in their future career and help them to find a high-paying job. Data from the written reflections also indicate learners were highly motivated by academic success and finding a good job. For example:

**Learner B:** (Written reflections)

English is very important in my life, for my future job, for school project and for social functions. I do not hope that my English ability will constraint my development in my future.

**Learner E:** (Written reflections)

English plays a vital role in the business world. It is the fundamental communicating tool in the workplace.

Nevertheless, Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand (2000) note that extrinsic motivation "does not imply a lack of self-determination in the behaviour performed...different types of extrinsic motivation can be internalized into the self-concept" (p. 61). Indeed, data in the post-questionnaire show that learners' intrinsic motivation (items 22 and 24) increased significantly. In the post-questionnaire all learners strongly agreed or agreed that they learned English because they felt satisfied and experienced pleasure when they could accomplish difficult language tasks and learn new things about English (items 22 and 24). The results of the questionnaires were substantiated by learners' responses in the collaborative evaluation meetings. Four learners spoke of intrinsic motivation. For example:

**Learner A:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

My motivation in learning English became stronger and stronger because I discovered more and more things that I don't know in the learning process... I don't feel discouraged, instead I am more determined to improve my English proficiency. This motivates me to work hard.

Apart from metacognitive and pedagogical gains, it is interesting to note that learners considered friendship; peers' and teachers' support; and closer and friendlier relationships with teachers as kinds of learning gains in the SAC. Three learners have mentioned gains of this kind in their written reflections and collaborative evaluation meetings. For example:

**Learner D:** (Written reflections)

I have gained friendship as I really enjoyed studying together with my friends. We know each other more after these two months. Also, I think learning is more effective as we can check each other's progress and support each other.

**Learner C:** (Collaborative evaluation meeting)

The relationship with the teacher is closer. In the classroom, we seldom have chance to tell the teacher individually our worries or difficulties, but we can have dialogues with the Help Desk teachers or the language advisor (researcher) in self-access centre.

The findings show that learners considered peers and teachers as the most "significant others" in their SALL process. This may suggest that learners' secure and satisfying connections with others are kinds of affective support learners gained in the SALL process. The importance of interactions with significant others in the

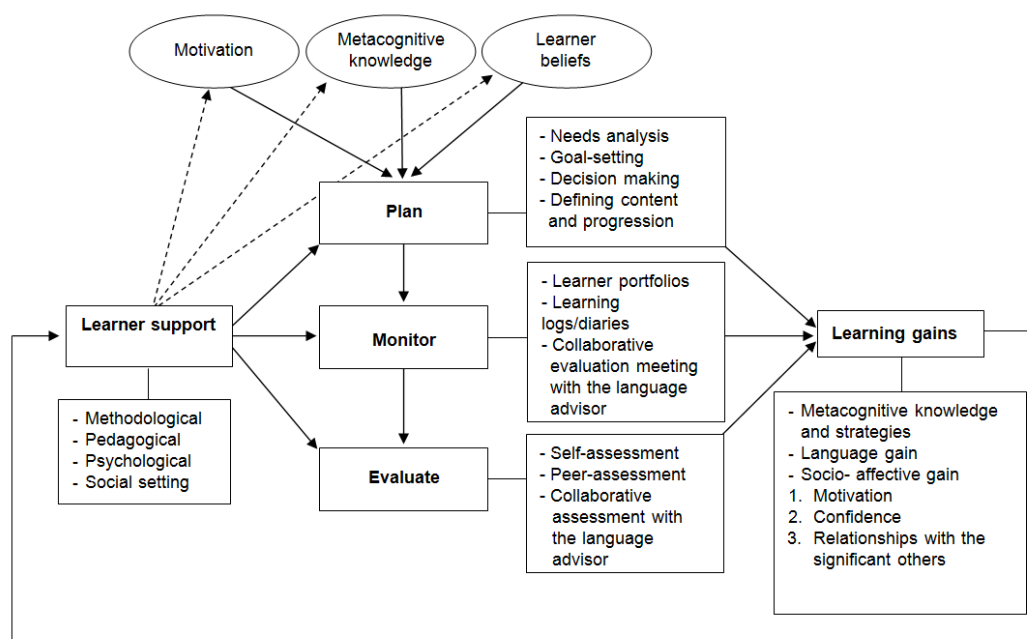


development of autonomy has been acknowledged by many key researchers in this field. As in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the distance between an individual's actual and potential development level can be narrowed through working collaboratively with more capable peers. Similarly, Garrison and Archer (2000) note that cognitive autonomy may best be achieved through collaboration and meaningful interaction with other learners and teachers.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has identified the kinds of learning gain participants perceived they had in the SALL process. Learners' gain in metacognitive knowledge and strategies was more obvious than gain in language proficiency. Learners also reported socio-affective gain. Their closer relationships with peers and teachers facilitated their learning and enhanced their motivation and confidence in language learning. The findings reinforce the notion that autonomy in language learning develops through *interaction* while independence for learners develops from *interdependence* (Little, 1999).

This study has provided some useful insights into learners' perceptions of learning gain in a SAC. As shown in Figure 1, SALL in a SAC is a cyclical process. SAC users hold different beliefs about language learning and have different levels of metacognitive awareness and motivation. During the SALL process (planning, monitoring and evaluation), learners receive different levels of support. There is a balanced combination of individual activities and collaboration with teachers and peers. Learner support may affect learners' motivation, metacognitive knowledge and beliefs about language learning. Based on this model of SALL in a SAC, we can tentatively conclude that providing appropriate learner support enhances the learning gain of learners. When the cycle continues, learning gain will be promoted.



**Figure 1: The Language Learning Process in a SAC**

This study shows an alternative way of evaluating learning gain in a SAC the key features of which are: learners are given the central role in the evaluation process; support and guidance are provided for learners; and different learner-centred

evaluation tools are used. It is clear that learning gain in a SAC cannot successfully be evaluated by traditional types of language assessments and that learners' self-assessment based upon perceptual rather than objective, verifiable data is necessary.

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## Literacy Practices at a Mexican Self-Access Centre

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to infer the literacy practices of university students at a self-access centre, following the sociocultural approach provided by the New Literacy Studies. This approach conceives literacy practices as social practices mediated by text, which are shaped by the domain they are part of. This is an in-progress qualitative research project developed at a Mexican self-access centre at the Language School of the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California. The methodology employed included the gathering of data through documents, observations and interviews with the participants and their teachers. This study revealed: the way students use the centre, some of the activities they engage in, the use and the development of reading in the centre and its purpose, and the role of beliefs, routines and abilities in the students actions.

**Key words:** literacy practices, self-access centres, New Literacy Studies, bi-literacy, Mexican tertiary students

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### 1. Introduction

Literacy in a second language has increased in the last decades because of changes in the world. Today many people need to learn a language because of their need to integrate with other cultures, because of business, tourism and religion, and because they need to access information (Wiley, 2005). Baja California is a clear example of this situation, it is a Mexican border state located just south of the United States border state of California. The people feel the need to learn English thus developing their bi-literacy (Cassany, 2006). The Autonomous University of Baja California (UABC) has made efforts to provide English courses that help the community in this task. The Language School of the university offers English courses which are complemented by the use of a self-access centre to support the learning of English.

Self-access centres imply not only the developing of target language literacy but also the use of different literacies. The main resources are printed or electronic texts which help students develop their reading and writing skills. Students have to handle mother tongue literacy, especially reading, to have access to some of the materials

which offer explanations and instructions in that language. Students also need a certain level of target language literacy because there are materials with instructions, exercises and explanations in that language. In the Self-Access Media Center for Languages Learning (CEMAAI) of UABC, there is a variety of technologies to facilitate learning such as videotape, DVD and CD players, and computers. The use of this equipment, especially the computers, requires a degree of computer literacy.

This study is focused on the analysis of the literacy practices of the students enrolled in the week long English program offered by the CEMAAI. The purpose of the study is to discover and understand the ways these students engage in the learning of English from the sociocultural perspective of the New Literacy Studies which conceives literacy as a social practice mediated by text (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), constituted by observable events and hidden elements that we can learn from.

## 2. The Context of the Study

The Language School of UABC teaches several languages. The most studied language is English; although French, Italian, German, Chinese and Spanish are also taught. Different types of programs are offered such as Week Courses, Saturday Courses and Special Graduate Courses. The English week-long course includes 6 hours of instruction in the classroom and 2 hours in the self-access centre. Half of the population in this program is university students because they have to prove they can use a foreign language at an intermediate level by the time they graduate.

### 2.1 The English course

The purpose of the English Language program of the Language School is to develop the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) supported by the necessary grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation and the development of autonomy in the students (*Programa de inglés para universitarios de la Escuela de Idiomas*, 2000). This is a 6 level program where students spend 6 hours per week in the classroom guided by a teacher and 4 hours in the CEMAAI. The program is divided into 3 phases: basic, intermediate and high intermediate. In Phase 1, students get acquainted with the culture of the target language countries, the structure of its language and vocabulary. Phase 2 helps students consolidate the previously learned grammar, vocabulary and skills by exposing them to more complex structures and tasks in writing and speaking. In Phase 3, students are expected to be able to communicate in a social and academic context efficiently. Students are expected to keep on acquiring vocabulary and complex structures. Each phase is run over 2 semesters, and the course is completed over a period of six semesters. The levels were defined in accordance with the criteria of The International English Language Testing Service (IELTS). The methodology of the whole program is mainly based on the communicative approach as defined by Widdowson (1990, in Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The purpose of this methodology is to help students communicate and learn to learn in and outside the classroom. Students are expected to be active, cooperative, responsible, respectful and interested in languages and culture and teachers have to act as facilitators who are patient, organized, creative and responsible.

### 2.2 The self-access centre

The CEMAAI is a self-access resource for students to practice what they have studied in class or a place for them to learn new things about the language they are

studying. The centre has a capacity of 200 users per hour. It is open from 7:00 to 22:00 from Monday through Friday and from 9:00 to 14:00 on Saturdays. It is run by a coordinator and some teachers who spend a few hours some days of the week and perform different activities such as: tutoring, helping, and answering questions about the materials, catalogues and the functioning of the centre. The centre includes materials to study grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and pronunciation skills. It also offers conversation and pronunciation sessions guided by a tutor. Students are allowed to decide what and how to learn, and for what period of time. They have access to different media and types of materials, such as books, magazines, cassettes, videocassettes, software, games, flashcards and posters, so that they can choose whatever they feel more comfortable with.

The academic aims of CEMAAI are:

- to practice and extend the knowledge obtained in the classroom
- to increase students' cultural background
- to improve students' pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary
- to help students improve and develop the four major language skills
- to train students to be able to state objectives and organize their own work
- to train students to choose materials
- to teach students to self-evaluate
- to teach students learning strategies and how to apply them

The centre is divided into 7 main areas: a reception area, a tutoring room, a video room with 13 VCRs and monitors and 8 DVD players, an audio room with 20 CD players, a computer room with 20 computers connected to the internet, a conversation room, and a reading and writing area.

Students receive some training to be able to use this centre. The first one is an initial training session of 2 hours where students are told about the implications of learning a new language, the type of learners they are, how to prepare their needs analysis and action plan and what the SAC offers to them. A tour in the SAC is included so that students have the opportunity to try out the materials and the equipment. They are also offered a tutoring system where the new students are encouraged to register, it is optional but it becomes obligatory on registration. Users are helped with their planning and are taught learning strategies that could be useful to develop different skills. The tutors have individualized half-hour sessions every two weeks with each user. During the semester, users have the choice to attend some mini-workshops that are offered during a week presenting an array of topics, with an emphasis on learning strategies. Students enjoy them very much because they have the opportunity to talk to different tutors about their concerns when working in the SAC.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.2 The new literacy practices

The NLS is the name given to a line of research (Cassany, 2006; Ewing, 2003; Gee, 2000) and to the theories about literacy based on sociocultural approaches. The NLS are part of what Gee (2000) called the 'social turn'. They "are based on the view that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural [...] practices of which they are but a part" (Gee, 2000, p. 180). These studies

have allowed the reconceptualization of literacy as a social and cultural product (Cassany, 2005). They have helped to identify the reality of many literacies and have obtained well sustained results of the sociocultural practices in which literacy plays a role (Lankshear, 1999).

The NLS have researched the different forms of literacy, its use and learning in different settings such as: the school, the family, the office and in the community (Jamison, 2007) or in a combination of them (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996). There are not many studies on second language literacy based on the NLS. However, those that exist refer to the development of bi-literacy and of second language literacy. Most of these studies are ethnographies which study a person or a family in the United States of America.

### **3.2 Literacy practices**

In this study, literacy is conceived as the ability a person has to communicate in oral or written form. It is a social practice (Lankshear, 1999) which is constructed and can be defined and redefined according to each specific situation (Santa Barbara Discourse Group, 1994). According to Barton and Hamilton (2000, p. 7), “literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing [...] language which people draw upon their life... literacy practices are what people do with literacy”. Hamilton (2000) says that the literacy practices are constituted by observable and unobservable elements. The visible constituents of these practices are the participants, the setting, the artifacts and the activities performed. They are all part of the literacy events. The non-visible constituents are all those elements that might be influencing, regulating or giving meaning to the practice. Some of them can be the hidden participants, the domain of the practice, other resources such as values, understandings, ways of thinking, and the routines of the participants which might not be seen. Table 1 summarizes the framework in which this study was conducted.

### **3.3 Self-access centres**

There are different definitions of what a self-access centre is. Gardner and Miller (1999) define it as a learning system that involves a series of elements such as: a) resources (materials, activities, people), b) administration which allows the coordination and planning of the functioning of the centre, c) a system to control and support users, d) training for the students and the staff, e) a tutoring system, f) self-assessment, g) learning feedback, h) evaluation of the centre and i) the development and adaptation of self-study materials. These authors also mention that self-access centres have to pay attention to individualization because it is important to recognize the differences among students, this is to be aware that students have different learning styles, strategies and needs so that the centre supports them in an individualized way.

One of the academic values of self-access centres is that they are student-centred. They promote autonomy which Holec (1981) defines as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Autonomy implies a type of learning which is independent. Independent learning as defined by Dickinson (1987) involves responsibility for learning, independent decision making, and to be able to identify one's own needs. However, certain conditions and training for the students have to be considered to support their use of a self-access centre.



**Table 1: Basic Elements of Literacy Events and Practices  
(after Hamilton, 2000)**

Elements visible within literacy events	Non-visible constituents of literacy practices
<u>Participants</u> : The people who can be seen interacting with the written text.	The hidden participants- other people, or groups of people involved in the social relationships of producing, interpreting, circulating and otherwise regulating written texts.
<u>Settings</u> : The immediate physical circumstances in which the interaction takes place.	The domain of the practice within which the event takes place and takes its sense and social purpose
<u>Artifacts</u> : The material tools and accessories that are involved in the interaction (including the texts)	All other resources brought to the literacy practice including non-material values, understandings, ways of thinking, feelings, skills and knowledge.
<u>Activities</u> : The actions performed by participants in the literacy event.	Structured routines and pathways that facilitate or regulate actions; rules of appropriacy and eligibility – who does/doesn't, can/ can't engage in particular activities

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 12 university students who were enrolled in the Week English program. They were approached in the centre and were asked to participate and to volunteer to be videotaped and audiotaped. Other participants in the study were the teachers or tutors of the centre of these students. They were 10 teachers with different training and experience in the field of English teaching. They were also asked to participate and to be audiotaped.

### 4.2 Methods to gather and analyse data

This was a descriptive-interpretative study that allows researching a learning situation through the analysis of qualitative data to capture and interpret a reality (Holliday, 2002). It is also based on the framework provided by Hamilton (2000) to study the literacy practices which allows us to see a slice of the reality of this centre of which literacy is part, and to infer from this view some of the elements that are also part of the practice and confer meaning to them.

The methodology to develop this project consisted of four main stages: In the first stage, documents about the domain of the practice (The English course program and the self-access centre: history of the centre, reports, regulations and the training course) were collected and described.

In the second stage, 12 observations of student participants were carried out to gather information about the events, 4 observations in the Reading and Writing area, 2 in the Video room, 2 in the conversation rooms, 2 in the Computer room and 2 in the Audio room. Observations were video-recorded. Recordings lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each (depending on how long participants decided to study). During

the observation special attention was given to different aspects such as: the activities, participants' interaction with others and the materials and setting.

The third stage consisted of interviewing the observed students and their teachers and tutors for 15 to 30 minutes (20 interviews). The objective was to find out about the hidden constituents of the literacy practice. Students were asked about possible participants who could be influencing their practices, such as their language teachers, parents or friends, previous experiences, abilities and knowledge. Through these interviews students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning and learning in a self-access facility were also addressed. These interviews were conducted in a private place so participants felt comfortable. These conversations were recorded to be transcribed later.

The fourth stage was the analysis of the data obtained in the observations and the interviews. First, the activities observed were described in full detail. Next, the interviews were analysed following the content analysis methodology suggested by Mayring (2000) to obtain categories which were identified inductively to be able to make conclusions and inferences.

## 5. Findings

Analysis of the data from this study is ongoing. This report is of the preliminary results. The findings are shown by work areas of the CEMAAI (The self-access centre). The activities that were observed are summarized in Table 2.

### 5.1 Role of literacy

In these activities the reading of the texts either in the mother tongue or the target language predominated while the production of text was reduced to some sentences and words. Students needed some level of reading proficiency in Spanish and English to access the texts in the materials which was not a problem for these university students. They acknowledged that it was necessary for them to have some linguistic knowledge to be able to work in the centre and some technological abilities to be able to cope with some of the materials and the equipment available in the centre, such as computers and some software which for some of these students was confusing (L1 and C1) and which they preferred not to work with. The language of communication among students while working in the different areas of the centre was Spanish, except in Conversation where they were required to communicate in English. We can see the need of certain proficiency in the use of bi-literacy and technological literacy to have access to the materials. Most of students read to learn.

### 5.2 Role of artifacts in the CEMAAI

All students used some kind of artifact to develop their activities in the centre which is normal in a resource centre like this. Some of these artifacts allowed them, according to their feedback, to study for a test (L1- L2), study grammar (L1-L2- C1 and C2), develop reading comprehension (L3), learn vocabulary (L3- L4- V1-V2-Con1-Con2-C1-C2), learn to pronounce (V1-V2-A1-A2) or learn about the target culture (L2). Different types of artifacts were used during these activities, such as: computers, CD players or DVD players. Some students used didactic materials such as: notes from class, exercises, a pronunciation book, a literary adapted book, bilingual dictionaries and educational software. Others used authentic materials such

as songs, articles in a magazine and movies. These results show a certain preoccupation among the students with the development of vocabulary.

**Table 2: Summary of Literacy Events in the Working Areas of CEMAAI**

Event	Contents
Lectura y Redacción Students: L1-L2-L3-L4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studying notes from class (sentences, charts, short paragraphs in English) (L1-L2)</li> <li>• Answering exercises in mental (L1) and written form (L1-L2)</li> <li>• Writing short notes and examples of sentences. (L1-L2)</li> <li>• Looking up words in dictionaries (printed and digital). (L2-L3-L4)</li> <li>• Reading a story (an adapted elementary literary book in English) (L3)</li> <li>• Forming words in English in a board game. (Scrabble) (L4)</li> </ul>
Video Students: V1- V2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watching a movie in English (V1)</li> <li>• Watching a movie and reading subtitles in Spanish. (V2)</li> </ul>
Conversación: Students: Con1-Con2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading aloud instructions and short texts. (Con1 Con2)</li> <li>• Writing answers (words, short sentences) in English (Con1)</li> <li>• Answering questions in oral form. (Con 1 –Con 2)</li> <li>• Answering and reading comprehension exercise in English. (Con2)</li> <li>• Stating points of view when answering in English. (Con1 - Con2)</li> </ul>
Computación Students: C1-C2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answering some pronunciation, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, spelling and grammar exercises by listening and repeating, just listening, listening and reading, listening and writing, listening and completing, listening and choosing images and simply reading. (C1 –C2)</li> <li>• Listening, reading and singing songs (C1)</li> </ul> <p>Note: Includes instructions in Spanish and English, short explanatory texts in Spanish, exercises in English, songs in English.</p>
Audio Students: A1 -A2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening and reading explanatory texts in Spanish.</li> <li>• Listening and repeating word lists and tip tongues in English with some letter sounds.</li> <li>• Listening and reading a magazine (4 articles)</li> </ul>

### 5.3 The working cultures in CEMAAI

The activities observed show the flexibility of work in the centre which is in line with its purpose of allowing students to work according to their needs and learning styles. Students can work in groups (L2-L4-C1-C2), or individually (rest of observations).

The routines to follow while working in CEMAAI can also be altered, for example students are expected to check-in on entrance, put their belongings in a locker, look at the catalogue, get the materials they need or ask the receptionist for them, work with the materials, return materials, fill out their activity control sheet and check out when they exit. However, it was observed that some of the students worked with their own materials in the Reading and Writing section (L1-L2). Most of them did not see the catalogue, except V1-V2 because they needed the control number to

obtain the movies they wanted. This situation might also imply a problem with the handling of the catalogues that might need to be revised. The literature recommends that catalogues have to be user friendly (see, for example, Ciel Language Support Network, 2000).

Most of students work in the different areas of the centre because they like to learn using those artifacts that these sections offer. They feel these artifacts connect the most with the activities in the classroom or what their teachers have suggested to them, or because they already possess those habits and bring them to the school. One example is L3 who says that she likes to read and that is why she read in the CEMAAI, another example is V1 and V2 who simple watched movies because they like doing that and it is a way to spend time and entertain themselves.

Students attend the CEMAAI because their teachers have decided it is a requirement and because their teachers convinced them of the benefits they might receive by attending the centre.

The study shows the presence of some dominant teachers who influence clearly what some of the students do in the CEMAAI or even suggest particular activities. That was the case of L3 and her teacher; both said they thought that by reading, vocabulary could be developed. There are other teachers who show openness to what the students do in the centre and accept whatever they do as long as they attend or practice the language.

#### **5.4 The value of practice**

It seems practice is an important issue in this context according to the way of thinking of the participants of the study. CEMAAI is appreciated by students and teachers for being a place to practice orally what is learned in the class; however, in the activities not a lot of language practice was observed.

#### **5.5 Attitude towards English learning**

It seems these students see English as valuable knowledge. They have a positive attitude towards the learning of this language because they see it as a tool of communication that would allow them to improve personally and professionally because they will be able to graduate (it is a requirement to get their Diploma) and get a good job in the future. They also think it is a local and international need because they live in a city on the border with the USA and it is a means to obtain information.

This analysis of the data allows the inference of 2 types of practices: academic and vernacular. Students bring to the centre some practices they perform in their daily life out of school such as reading literature, watching movies, playing games because the centre supports them with authentic materials. They also bring all those school practices that didactic materials promote such as doing grammar, vocabulary and reading exercises. It should be remembered that these finding are still preliminary.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this qualitative study, the literacy practices were approached from a portrait of the situation, which did not have the intention to show all the actual practices students

are engaged in at the CEMAAI. However, it allowed the inference that practices in the centre are of two types, school and vernacular practices which are composed of the activities performed by the students and their interaction with others and with the materials available in the centre; and which are influenced and shaped partly by their teachers, by the way the centre is organized, by the artifacts available (which already implies a certain way of use of them), by the English course which states that there are tests, that they have to study grammar, learn vocabulary, etc., by the students' beliefs about how a language should be learned and their habits which they cannot set aside just because they are in another context.

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## **Part 6**

# **Technology for Learner Autonomy**

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## What's the Story? Motivating e-Learners with Fiction

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### Abstract

Fiction (e.g. short stories and feature films) has long been used in language courses to expose learners to authentic material in which a strong narrative is seen as a motivating element. This paper reports on the elaboration and use of a story specially written as an e-learning course for non-specialist learners of English in French universities. Issues addressed when designing the course were the type of exercises that should accompany the story and the order in which these exercises should be presented. The first issue relates to choices to be made by course designers in terms of content and aims; the second, which can be seen in the light of the self-determination theory of motivation, relates to choices made by learners as to when, if at all, they do the exercises proposed. After describing the context for which the material was developed, an analysis of its use by learners on a blended learning course is presented. Results are discussed in terms of linguistic progress, motivation and autonomy.

**Key words:** fiction, narrative, motivation, autonomy, choice, EFL, French tertiary students

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### 1. Introduction

The use of fiction in the English language classroom has been widespread for a long time. The advent of the video cassette in the 1970s allowed for the exploitation of feature films to become a part of EFL classes, but written fiction was used even before that. Indeed it could be argued that fiction has been a component of EFL course books since the 1950s or earlier when dialogues were attributed to characters, generally belonging to a 'typical' British or American family, engaged in everyday activities. Whether this counts as fiction depends on one's definition of the term: the narrative elements were limited and there was no plot as such, the 'stories' being self-contained within each unit, rather than spread out through the book to form a single narrative.

Despite these limitations, the reasons why such a development took place are already apparent in these course books: however stereotypical, a social and cultural context is



created within which characters behave and interact, thus giving the learner an opportunity to identify with them and become more involved, both cognitively and emotionally, than with a set of isolated sentences. The dialogues, 'spoken' by characters, were also closer to authentic speech than had previously been the case.

Extensive reading has been advocated by Krashen (1989) and Coady (1997) amongst others as a means of exposing learners to sufficient quantities of text for them to acquire vocabulary (though see Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998, for a critique of this position). In the field of English for Specific Purposes, Petit (2004) identifies professionally-based fiction, such as the novels of John Grisham in the field of law, as a means of engaging learners with the language of their speciality expressed through a strong narrative.

Video produced a quantum leap, with context becoming more complex and complete, and the medium changing from written to audiovisual. A number of claims have been made with regard to the use of audiovisual material. White, Easton and Anderson (2000) suggest that video is associated not just with high enjoyment and low anxiety but also greater cognitive engagement, with visual and contextual features assisting in the recall of language. These authors are talking about the video component of a language course, in which characters may appear in sketches but where, as in a course book, the narrative element may again be limited. Feature films add plot and narrative to the package, and according to King (2002) the strengthened role of the story makes them "more intrinsically motivating than videos made for EFL/ESL teaching." According to Laurillard, Stratfold, Luckin, Plowman and Taylor (2000, p. 2), narrative is "fundamentally linked to cognition" since it "provides a macro-structure, which creates global coherence, contributes to local coherence and aids recall through its network of causal links and sign posting."

Given these various arguments, the case to be made for the use of narrative fiction in a language course appears to be strong. Feature films, however, with their density and difficulty of language, can be well beyond the reach of intermediate level students. A study carried out in the self-access centre (SAC) of the University of Provence showed that out of 21 different activities, watching films was ranked second in terms of pleasure (after listening to songs), but sixth in terms of usefulness. Films can of course be limited to excerpts, but the viewing experience normally associated with them is then profoundly altered. One possible answer is to script the dialogues according to the needs and level of the learners whilst trying to maintain the narrative element. This again is not new: EFL video courses incorporating a fictional element began to appear as soon as the VHS format became widespread. The development of the internet offered further possibilities, exemplified by the BBC series *Flatmates*, which incorporates audio and text, and receives up to a million hits a month. However, such internet based resources may be costly or time-consuming to produce, and are not very common. As a consequence, there is a lack of research into how such resources are used and perceived by students. This paper reports on an e-learning project being developed for non-specialist learners of English in French universities. Originally conceived as an online complement for students of the SAC of the University of Provence, it is currently being adapted to include a video component for the website of the Université Ouverte des Humanités, which offers resources in all the human sciences to 20 universities in France, representing roughly 250,000 students.

## 2. The Issues

When language learning moves from the classroom to a SAC, the issue of autonomy is inevitably raised. Although some classroom teachers may actively promote it, and some SACs seek to restrict it, learner autonomy has traditionally been associated with the concept of self-access (Holec, 2000; Raby, Baillé, Bressoux, & Chapelle, 2003). With the development of online learning, where students no longer need to come to the SAC, their capacity to exercise autonomy becomes even more central to the learning process. Several studies point to the high drop-out rate amongst distance learners (see Tyler-Smith, 2006, for a discussion) who have to find within themselves the motivating factors they might otherwise find in face-to-face contact with others. As emphasised by Little (1990), this confirms that autonomy is not simply a matter of working on one's own, but of being able to organise and benefit from the social aspects of learning by interacting with others. This is clearly more difficult for an online learner than a learner in a SAC.

In theory, autonomy can lead to increased motivation, as postulated by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2002) within the framework of self-determination theory. Generally we prefer to make our own decisions rather than be told what to do; we prefer to have choice rather than no choice; we prefer to control our own behaviour rather than have it controlled by others. Given these preferences, it might seem that it is simply necessary to allow learners the freedom to decide for themselves in order to increase their motivation. Many studies have shown that choice can indeed have a positive effect on motivation (see, for example, Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978). In a SAC, however, this is not always the case. Certain learners have no wish to take upon themselves the extra burden of organising their learning, especially those whose level is weak and who find the cognitive demands of dealing with the target language already taxing enough. More advanced learners may also flounder if they have not developed the metacognitive skills and knowledge (Wenden, 1998) considered necessary for fully autonomous learning. Apart from these problems, it may simply be a case of being faced with too much choice, which some studies have shown can be demotivating. Iyengar and Lepper (2000) point out that the studies linking choice and motivation typically offer a range of half a dozen choices, but if this is increased to thirty, demotivation can occur: "The precise number of options that would be considered reasonable, as opposed to excessive, may vary as a function of both the chooser's perception of their choice-making goals and their prior experience with the subject of choice" (p. 1004). The SAC may find it necessary to combat this choice overload, which Schwartz (2000) has spoken of as a 'tyranny', by organising resources so that learners who are overwhelmed by choice can follow a set pathway if they wish. Such an approach to autonomy would thus consist in providing opportunities for it to develop, by concentrating first on motivating learners, and then encouraging learners to reflect on their aims, and decide whether what they are doing corresponds to those aims.

Linked to the issue of autonomy is that of compliance. Dörnyei and Otto (1998) point out that a large proportion of language learners have little or no choice in the matter: a foreign language, very often English, is imposed. Initially, then, learners are complying with an obligation. They may find later that they internalise this to the extent that it becomes also, indeed primarily, a personal aim, but the obligation remains, with its attendant features of marks, timetables and homework. When fully internalised, these typical features of a controlling environment, as opposed to one that favours autonomy, may come to be considered as the norm, such that a learner

is no longer consciously complying. For those less intrinsically motivated, though, compliance (or indeed defiance) may continue throughout an activity if it is considered to be dull or irrelevant to the learner's needs. The activity is undertaken out of obligation: over and above the possible feelings of guilt or anxiety involved, the consequence of not doing it are assessed in terms of increased likelihood of failure at a test, the importance or not of such failure, and the risk of incurring a teacher's disapproval. Any attempt to promote autonomy needs therefore to take into account not just the learner's readiness for autonomy (Cotterall, 1995) but also the degree of compliance which a teaching resource is likely to arouse. In implementing any resource, one therefore has to decide how compulsory it is and how much choice one is offering the learners. With a narrative there is a further element, inherent to the resource itself, namely the causality which imposes a particular order. One cannot jump around from chapter to chapter, so choice is necessarily limited (though interactive stories also exist, where choice is offered via hyperlinks). A narrative may therefore be appealing, but it also restricts choice, which in terms of motivational value may lead to conflicting outcomes.

### 3. The Resource

It was with these issues in mind that the resource *My Sweet Babe* (MSB) was developed. A story composed of written and oral documents distributed over ten units, it includes accompanying activities, mainly to consolidate vocabulary. The main skill targeted is listening comprehension, since the majority consists of spoken dialogue. This is scripted, but an attempt was made to keep it as authentic as possible. Apart from their value as learning material, the activities, presented as optional, were developed as a means of reinstating choice, which the narrative, due to its linearity, restricts.

The general question at a theoretical level was how the use of fiction influenced the relationship between autonomy and motivation. Specifically, would the narrative be seen as motivating despite the linearity it imposes, or would the loss of autonomy be felt as a demotivating factor? Would the choice allowed in the activities compensate for the loss of choice imposed by the story?

More practical questions concerned the waylearners assessed the resource and whether they thought it was effective. The answers are based on their reactions to the first two units of MSB, as expressed in a questionnaire.

How they assess it is about the overall architecture of story plus activities. Regarding the activities, the question is whether they found them useful, and would choose to do them all, just some of them or none. They were also asked to choose the way in which they would do them: as they go along, at the end of each unit, or at the end of the whole story (10 units).

The effectiveness of the resource depends on whether learners find it motivating. The more motivating it is, the more they are likely to continue and the quality of their attention is likely to be higher. The assessment of whether it is motivating depends on the pleasure they find in doing it as well as how useful they think it is in reaching their aims. They were therefore asked to self-assess their progress in language skills. A sub-group did a word recognition test before and after using the resource to see if there was indeed any progress made.

Collaborative tasks were not addressed in this study, which is not to deny their importance, but because the initial design of the course was for individual use, with the possibility of group tasks being added later, depending on the institutional context.

## 4. Results

The questionnaire was returned by 86 students in their first year of psychology. The work was undertaken on a voluntary basis, since it was not officially part of their course, but a small bonus was awarded to those who took part.

Two groups were formed in order to compare the effect of the accompanying activities. One group did the story alone for unit 1 (comprehension condition), then the story plus the activities for unit 2 (comprehension-plus condition); the other group did the opposite. Both groups were asked to assess the usefulness of the activities and decide whether they would actually choose to do them if they continued using the resource. The aim was to see how students perceived both the story itself and the activities, and how they would exercise their freedom of choice.

The answers were sent by mail both after unit 1 and after unit 2, to see if there was a difference between the comprehension and comprehension-plus conditions. No significant difference emerged between the two conditions; in other words, the presence of accompanying activities did not affect students' overall perception of the resource either in terms of its usefulness or of its pleasure value.

The results reveal that globally the resource is well received. All participants see fiction in general (features films and television series) as a good way of learning English (78% very, 22% fairly). A majority find MSB interesting (11% very, 85% fairly) and useful (32% very, 66% fairly) and are keen to continue (12% very, 71% fairly). Those not keen to continue (17%) cite the level of the material as the main problem (too easy or too difficult). The activities themselves, independently of the story, are perceived as very useful by 76% and fairly useful by 20%.

A majority also see self-study as suitable for them (21% very, 65% fairly). This contrasts with a previous survey undertaken in the SAC of the University of Provence, which showed self-access to be far less well received (Prince, 2009). The discrepancy is perhaps due to the different ways in which the learning materials were presented. In the SAC, a wide choice of materials was on offer, such that learners were forced to reflect upon their aims each time they went there, and even though guidance was on hand if requested, they did not always resort to it and consequently felt rather at a loss as to what to do. With MSB, the choice is limited to which of the accompanying activities to do and when, and with easy access to the key, learners perceive self-study as the use of a single package in which they may pick and choose. Many self-study courses are indeed sold in precisely this manner, but it cannot be said that they promote autonomy in the way that a full self-access system does.

Learners were asked to decide how they would do the activities if they were to follow the whole course of 10 units. Almost half (47%) said they would do them after each unit, and a similar number (42%) as they go along, i.e. during the course of the unit. Only 7% would opt to do them as and when they feel like it and no one replied that

they would not do the activities at all. These replies are consistent with the perception of the activities as useful, and appear to confirm the earlier finding in the SAC that learners assess activities along different dimensions and adapt their behaviour accordingly. Of the various activities accompanying the story, listening while reading is perceived as the most useful (78%) whilst detailed listening (listening to short extracts and answering questions) is considered useful by just 44%. The relatively low score for this activity may be because it is time-consuming and as it is intended to consolidate what the learners have already heard, it presents no new material. This sort of detailed comprehension activity may in fact be reminiscent of school, with its attendant, possibly negative, memories.

When asked to choose between a resource like MSB (i.e. a story plus accompanying activities) or a collection of separate documents plus activities, 81% of participants said they would prefer to learn English by means of a story. The reasons given have mainly to do with the continuity of a story, which is seen as stimulating, easier to return to after a break, and thus more motivating. To a lesser extent, the language gains resulting from the activities were also cited. Those who would prefer a collection of different documents mainly put forward a need for variety, which would enable them to broaden the range of vocabulary encountered, and also reduce the risk of lassitude that might result from a story if it did not interest them.

In terms of language gains, the results of learners' self-assessment of their progress are consistent with the content of the resource itself, in other words the most gain was perceived in listening, followed by vocabulary, reading, grammar and cultural knowledge (extra documents relating to cultural aspects of the English-speaking world were not included in the sample learners were given). A smaller group of 40 students was tested before and after using the resource on 40 words included in it, by means of an auditory lexical decision task. Compared to control words matched for frequency, length and stress pattern, there were significant gains for the target words, with an average of 3.6 more words being recognised in the post-test than in the pre-test. Although this may seem a rather small gain, it is consistent with the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition noted by researchers (see, for example, Schmitt, 1998).

## 5. Discussion

Overall, the results show a high level of satisfaction with fiction in general, as well as with the particular resource studied, as a means of learning English. However, a certain number of reservations need to be made.

Firstly, regarding the survey itself, students were given only the first two units of the resource. Whether their enthusiasm would be maintained throughout the full ten units remains to be seen. Furthermore, these students were volunteers who were awarded a small bonus on their final mark, which may have influenced them to reply favourably to the questionnaire. Finally, the participants were all psychology students and cannot be considered representative of students in other subjects such as science or engineering. As always, therefore, perceptual data of this sort needs to be treated with caution. Nonetheless, what emerges appears to confirm the contention of Laurillard et al. (2000) concerning the powerful motivating potential of narrative: due to the overall framework they provide and the causal links that comprise them, stories can incite learners to engage more willingly with learning material.

To anyone concerned with promoting learner autonomy, a more fundamental limitation to this type of resource is the lack of scope it offers learners to develop their metacognitive skills. Although choice is provided through the optional nature of the activities, there is little that incites learners to reflect upon what they are doing or to make more informed choices based upon goal-setting and self-evaluation. However, this limitation can be overcome by including questions or tasks specifically designed for that purpose, along the lines of the strategy training suggested by Vandergrift (2002) for listening comprehension.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of this study, although limited in scope, concur with the idea that narrative can play a role in enhancing learners' motivation. Beyond the particular resource studied, the question arises as to how narrative can be integrated into teaching practices. Learners are commonly asked to provide stories themselves, for example by inventing a character to fit a picture, but narrative can also be used to create a framework that facilitates recall of vocabulary, for example, by linking words to be learnt in a story (Prince, 2007). Another possibility is to take an existing character, such as Alice in Wonderland, and have her encounter other characters who introduce her to the documents or language points to be studied. Although in terms of plot this might not qualify as fiction, it again provides a framework that functions as an extra cue when it comes to recall. Learners themselves can contribute their own ideas and beyond the benefits in terms of enhanced recall, such activities can therefore also provide opportunities for developing language skills. Unlike *My Sweet Babe*, which required considerable work to be developed, these possibilities can be implemented without creating an unmanageable workload.

Learners assess activities and resources along different dimensions, notably pleasure, usefulness and effort. How compulsory an activity is, and how much choice it incorporates within it, also influence learners' perception of it and their willingness to undertake it. The more an activity is seen as compulsory, offering no choice, and either dull, pointless or both, the more learners are likely to adopt an attitude of compliance or defiance. Narrative is thus one way to foster more favourable attitudes, with the ultimate aim of instilling the intrinsic motivation that will lead to greater autonomy.

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## ICT-Based Teacher-Facilitated and Self-Directed Learning for Mother Tongue Languages

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### Abstract

A new ICT-based pedagogical approach for the learning and teaching of Mother Tongue languages has been introduced in more than 30 Singapore schools at the primary level. Curriculum time is structured to incorporate both teacher-facilitated and self-paced learning in the classroom where an e-learning portal is made available to provide a rich repository of multimedia content for extended reading and writing activities, with various supporting functions and Web 2.0 tools. Access to the portal is also available for self-directed learning beyond the classroom. Preliminary evaluation shows a definite advantage of the new approach. The finding is that, when a typical pupil of the comparison class (not exposed to the new approach) stands at the 50th percentile, a typical pupil of the new approach stands at the 71st percentile. It is observed that pupils' interest in learning Mother Tongue languages also increased. This paper describes the pedagogical design, implementation, materials and outcomes of this approach to Chinese, Malay and Tamil language learning, and shares ideas for educators embarking on e-learning initiatives and introducing self-directed learning to young children.

**Key words:** languages, educational technology, self-directed learning, mother tongue languages, Singaporean primary students, Web 2.0

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### 1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) today impinge on all aspects of daily life – including school life (Walters & Fehring, 2009). ICT is generally believed to: empower teachers and learners; transform teaching and learning from being highly teacher-dominated to learner-centred; and foster the development of 21st century skills (Trucano, 2005). It also plays an invaluable role in enhancing student learning and improving educational outcomes (Gulek & Demirtas, 2005) as well as improving learning especially in the presence of four effective learning conditions, namely, active engagement, participation in groups, frequent interaction and feedback, and connections to the real world (Roschelle, Pea, Hoadley, Gordin, &



Means, 2000). There appears to be general consensus that ICT greatly contributes to student motivation for learning and can promote learner autonomy (Trucano, 2005).

Language learning should be in keeping with the changing needs and characteristics of learners alongside “a global learning landscape (that) is being transformed and shaped by the uptake of digital communication tools and ubiquitous networked applications” (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010, p. 28). An array of Web 2.0 tools that serves to integrate essential learning outcomes, such as lifelong learning and self-directed learning, is available for adoption today. However, these affordances would not transform learning should teachers continue to use ICT to support existing approach or teacher-centred practices (Dunleavy, Dextert, & Heinecke, 2007). Rethinking the pedagogy has become a necessity.

## 2. Context

Education should continually anticipate the needs of the future and prepare learners to meet those needs; that is the underlying philosophy of the Masterplan for ICT in Education laid out by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore (MoE-Singapore, 2010). The Masterplan espouses a vision to enrich and transform the learning environments of the learners and equip them with the critical competencies and dispositions to succeed in a knowledge economy. The outcome goal is that learners develop competencies for self-directed and collaborative learning through the effective use of ICT as well as become discerning and responsible ICT users.

Singapore continues to implement a bilingual language policy which requires all students (including foreigners) in the Singapore education system to learn English, which is the main medium of instruction in schools, and a Mother Tongue language (MoE-Singapore, 2008). The three official Mother Tongue languages (MTL) are Chinese (CL), Malay (ML) and Tamil (TL). MTL as a subject takes up approximately 15% of the total curriculum time (MoE-Singapore, 2009).

The intention behind the bilingual language policy is to equip students with the language competencies to access both eastern and western cultures, and to give a global outlook. These strengths will give students a distinct competitive edge, helping them to relate with people from different backgrounds, and to adapt and thrive in a globalised world (MoE-Singapore, 2008, p. 1).

However, today, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain MTL competencies as more speak English as their main language at home. The teaching of MTL must therefore evolve in response to this trend.

A new ICT-based pedagogy for the learning and teaching of MTLs has been introduced in more than 30 primary schools to date. In 2008 the Educational Technology Division (ETD) of MOE started collaborating with 10 schools with a view to increasing the competency level of learners of the CL through a programme which came to be known as the 10°C programme (MoE-Singapore, 2009).

The 10°C programme leverages the use of ICT to promote learners' interest in the target language, and to improve on their reading and writing skills in an interactive environment. 10°C adopts a learner-centred model which is well-balanced with

teachers' guidance and facilitation. It facilitates independent, differentiated learning and peer interaction.

In the 10'C programme, learners use networked computers to access extended reading materials in a centralised e-learning platform and create different pieces of writing, all of which are specially designed to reinforce the respective lesson objectives. With its focus on language use, the programme provides ample opportunities for learners to consolidate and expand their learning, as well as experience incremental successes in their writing.

The 10'C programme is in concert with MOE's "Teach Less, Learn More" precept, which advocates that learning should take place collaboratively and is carried out according to the pace at which the learner learns comfortably. It is also aligned to the primary CL syllabus guidelines that emphasize authentic language use, and independent and differentiated learning.

ETD has since replicated and adapted the 10'C programme for the learning and teaching of other MTLs. The 10'M Aksara programme (or 10'M in short) for ML and the 10'T Sigaram programme (or 10'T in short) for 'TL have begun the pilot and trial phases respectively while the 10'C programme has been extended to even more schools. The three programmes adopt the same ICT-based pedagogical model and principles with slight variations suited to each individual language.

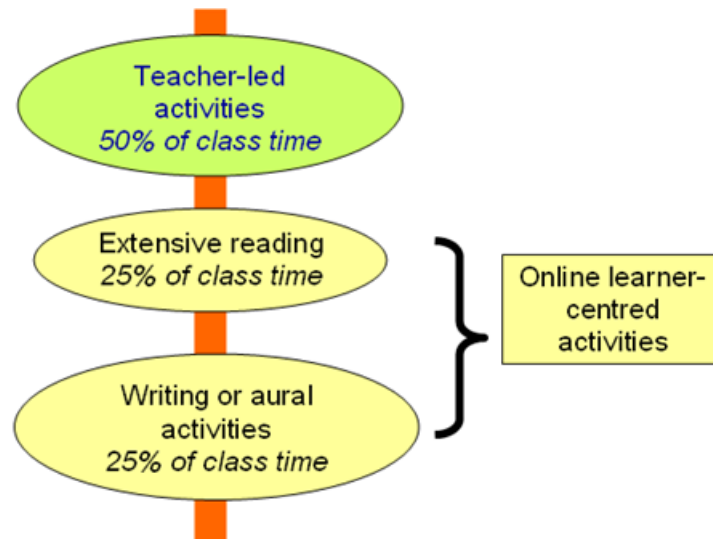
### 3. Curriculum, Tasks, Materials

#### 3.1 Pedagogical model

The new ICT-based pedagogy for the learning and teaching of MTLs attempts to break away from the 'high input, low output' didactic teaching method for better learning outcomes. It is based on the "Leap Forward" model that has been successfully experimented with in the teaching of various subjects at the primary and secondary levels in China. It is a blended model with both teacher-led and learner-centred constructivist approaches in lesson design. The assumption that learners acquire knowledge and skills only through teachers' teaching no longer holds. Instead, teachers should recognize and tap into the prior knowledge and skills of their learners. By taking learners' prior knowledge and skills into consideration, the lesson objectives can be achieved within half of the lesson time while the rest of the curriculum time can be used to engage pupils in extensive reading and writing or aural activities directly related to the corresponding lesson objectives through a web-based learning portal for optimum results.

Learners can read at their own pace and construct meaning for themselves along the way. The extended reading materials will help them improve their language abilities and build up their knowledge repertoire. Likewise, their fluency in written or verbal expression will increase with extensive practice as well as through opportunities to explore and learn independently within curriculum time.

With the new ICT-based pedagogy, a typical MTL lesson is structured into three parts with equal time allocation for teacher-led activities and learner-centred activities. The learner-centred portion is equally subdivided into an extensive reading segment and a written or aural segment in an online ICT environment (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Representation of the 10'C, 10'M & 10'T Pedagogical Model**

### 3.2 Tasks

The teacher-led activities are tuning-in activities or scaffolding activities that set the direction or guide learners to achieve the learning objectives or desired learning outcomes. Under the learner-centred activities, the extensive reading portion provides more input to the learning or acquisition of knowledge prior to producing a piece of written work or an oral presentation as an immediate output of learning. With this learning model, learners are almost immediately put to the task of producing the vocabulary and expressions learnt earlier. Thus, there is an immediate reinforcement and application of learning. Oral communication activities can be used to assist weaker pupils before introducing them to online writing activities.

Reading tasks are assigned based on learners' ability; that is, clearly differentiated either in terms of the graded reading materials assigned or the number of reading materials expected to be completed. It is equally important to allow the learners to perform the task at their own individual pace. Learners could be encouraged to track their own progression and to surpass their expected performance; thus, inculcating the values or spirit of self-directed learning.

Similarly, the written tasks can also be differentiated based on learner's ability. Teachers can also allow for some degree of negotiation of the task with the learners. Written work can be alternated with verbal expression or presentation as a measure of learning. Figure 2 shows the distinct activities that take place in an ML classroom.

### 3.3 Materials

ETD has designed and developed more than 600 multimedia extended reading resources aimed to heighten pupils' interest in reading. During extended reading sessions, learners can either follow a karaoke-styled animation over text with voice-over model reading or simply mouse-over unfamiliar words to access the pronunciation that comes with a brief explanation. This use of ICT has helped tentative and diffident readers overcome their initial fear of reading the prescribed

text. ICT-assisted learning has facilitated independent and personalised learning among learners who have complete control of the media.

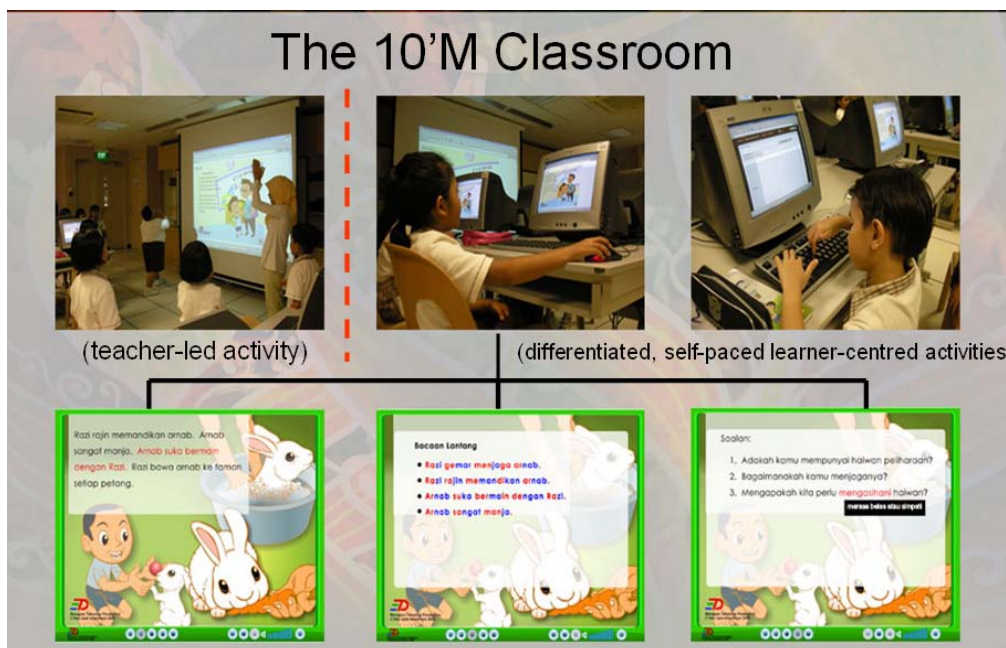


Figure 2: Representation of the Flow of Tasks in a 10'M classroom

The content for the reading passages were written by teachers who have an intimate knowledge of the learners' interests and language competencies. Colourful illustrations help to reinforce vocabulary items as well as the overall theme of the reading passages. Question stimuli are also provided to help generate either meaningful conversations among learners through peer discussion or relate the content of the reading passages back to their personal experiences so as to enhance their comprehension of the passage. Some of the features of the reading resources earlier mentioned are shown in Figure 3.

The screenshot shows a reading resource titled "புதிய வாகனம்" (New Vehicle). The text describes a family's excitement about a new red car. Annotations highlight interactive features:

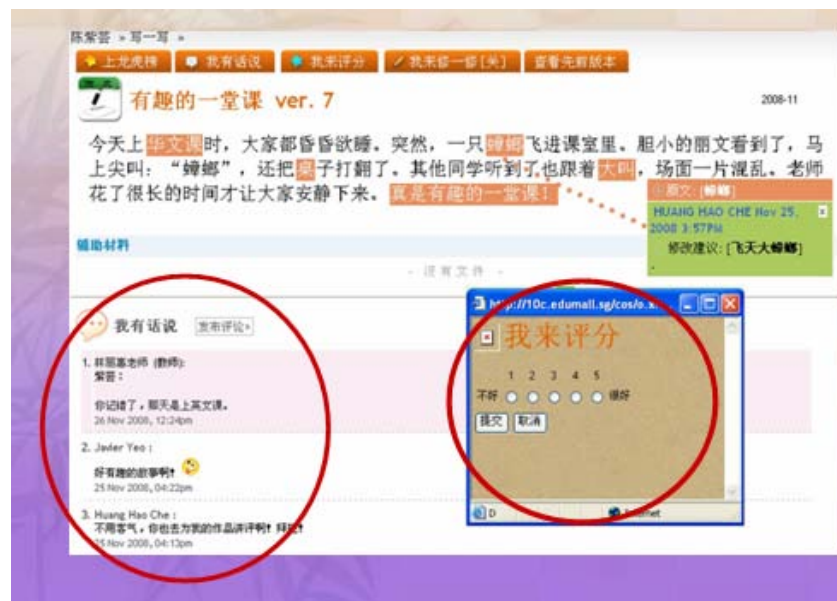
- Mouse-over function:** A callout box explains that hovering over a word (like "எங்கள்") allows learners to hear its pronunciation and view a karaoke-style animation with model reading.
- Control panel:** A callout box points to a set of icons at the bottom of the page, stating that this panel enables learners to repeat model reading at their own pace.

Figure 3: Features of a Sample TL Reading Resource

In developing writing skills for CL, by using the hanyu pinyin text input system, learners are more ready to express their ideas and thoughts that are at times beyond their store of Chinese characters. More often than not, learners have prior knowledge of certain concepts and lexical terms acquired through reading or listening, but may not have learnt the respective Chinese script. The use of ICT has helped accelerate the entrance into continuous prose writing. Similarly, the use of the virtual keyboard for TL has helped learners who have not yet mastered skills to type in the Tamil text input system to have a head start in writing.

Central to the pedagogy is the use of a web-based inter-school learning portal specially designed for the respective MTL programmes. Learners and teachers of the participating schools have been given access to the learning portals where they each have an individual homepage and are assigned to a group or class page. The portal serves as an e-portfolio containing progressive evidence of their learning.

The incorporation of Web 2.0 features facilitates peer interaction not only within the same class, but also across different classes and schools. Learners are able to rate, edit and comment on work done by their peers posted in the centralised e-learning platform. They are engaged in discussions and such opportunities for interaction on a regular basis will go some way in helping pupils develop into collaborative and self-directed learners. Figure 4 illustrates the dynamic peer interaction and contribution to learning from a piece of written work in CL.



**Figure 4: Features of the 10'C Portal that Enables Collaborative Web-based Learning**

## 4. Reflections

The response from participating schools has been very encouraging. Pupils enjoy the lessons, and look forward to the time set aside for self-paced learning. Teachers are heartened to find that their pupils are enthusiastic, actively participating in their lessons, and able to produce good work using computer-assisted writing activities.

Some pupils have even accessed the materials in the portal beyond the curriculum hours. Parents are pleased that their children have turned into active learners and gave affirming feedback.

Preliminary evaluation also shows a definite advantage of the new approach. When a typical pupil of a comparison class (not exposed to the new approach) stands at the 50th percentile, a typical pupil of a class using the new approach stands at the 71st percentile, assuming normality of the test scores (MoE-Singapore, 2009).

The new ICT-based pedagogy for the learning and teaching of MTLs is contributing to the fostering of learner autonomy in language learning in primary schools in Singapore.

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## Learner Autonomy Online: Stories from a blogging experience

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### Abstract

Despite some efforts to develop learner autonomy in virtual learning environments, there is a need for more qualitative studies to see the effects of Web 2.0 tools like blogging on autonomous learning. Keeping this need in mind, this study reports the experiences of 17 preparatory class EFL learners in an eight-week period of learner-directed learning by blogging. The participants developed blogs by uploading materials they read and wrote. In performing such tasks, they made decisions about the layout and the content, what reading texts to select and upload, and what and how to write in addition to responding to the content of blogs written by their peers. Data were collected through observations, a post-task questionnaire and structured interviews to see the challenges associated with the overall decision-making processes which, as the results show, ranged from topic selection to proofreading. Similarly, the modes of representation among which the students could choose such as texts, audio and video materials were identified within this process to understand students' choices in learning with blogs. The analyses of the questionnaires and interviews shed light on the overall experience of learning with blogging especially through the lens of learner autonomy.

**Key words:** learner autonomy, blogging, technology, Web 2.0 tools, EFL, Turkey

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### 1. Introduction

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, humanistic orientations in language education resulted in support for independent learning by taking into account individual differences. Thus, learners were considered as the agents of the learning process. This consideration in turn brought about what some researchers have traditionally called *the autonomy movement*. Within the paradigm of *learner-centeredness*, this movement has received much support from researchers and teachers alike. It also gained a new dimension when new technologies provided language teachers with

new tools to develop autonomy in virtual settings. These settings helped provide learners with an audience, which in turn at least partially eliminated one of the most commonly encountered criticisms expressed by student writers that they do not have a real purpose in writing and that they do not have a social audience to write for.

One of the new virtual settings is blogs (also called weblogs). Whatever learners write on their blogs can be read by others on purpose or accidentally. This seems to be the feature that makes blogs intuitively appealing for most learners. Being guided by a knowledgeable teacher, learners can study a second language autonomously by creating such online entities. Warschauer (2010) comments that blogs “have revived the importance of authorship, and indeed created more authors than probably any other medium in human history” (p. 4). This is because blogs provide a free and easy writing environment.

The purpose of the blogging project reported here was to equip the participants with various skills that could be used in an asynchronous communication environment. These skills include but are not limited to:

1. To be able to make decisions on one’s own.
2. To be less teacher dependent.
3. To be able to take independent action.
4. To be involved in critical reflection.
5. To be able to use learning strategies.
6. To equip oneself with computer skills.
7. To help learners to possess a sense of achievement.
8. To communicate without constraints of time and place.

In short, this study is an attempt to discover how an online asynchronous learning environment in the form of a blog fits into the context of learning English autonomously.

## 2. Background to the Study

Learner autonomy is seen within the general paradigm of learner-centred instruction, which according to Macaro (1997) “draws its rationale from theories of *individual learner differences* and proposes a learning environment which might best cater for those differences” (italics in the original) (p. 168). This kind of instruction became popular with the introduction of humanistic language teaching in the 1970s. The concept of autonomy in language learning was more widely explored by Henri Holec’s (1981) seminal work. Autonomous learning is defined by McDonough (1998) as being “based on the principle that learners should take maximum responsibility for, and control of, their own learning styles and stages outside the constraints of the traditional classroom” (p. 25).

Since learners are the agents of learning activities, autonomy is not possible if they attach too much importance to outside factors rather than considering themselves as the most significant component of their own learning. This is the greatest threat facing learner autonomy. As Kupfer (1990) aptly puts it, autonomy “like a skill, requires ongoing encouragement” (p. 149). Acquiring autonomy then is a process to be pursued over a period of time.



It is important to recognise a distinction between autonomy, which mostly concerns learner control, and independence which is about self-reliance. Thus, autonomy is not equal to self-study although it may include such a component. Since autonomy is the product of liberal Western education, it might not be appropriate for some non-Western contexts (Little, 2000). In such contexts, dependence on teachers might imply acceptance of their authority as a true source of knowledge.

For the purposes of this study the relevant features of learner autonomy are:

1. It involves four cornerstones: decision-making, independent action, critical reflection and detachment (Little, 2000).
2. How learners and teachers view autonomy is culture specific.
3. Autonomy may include but is not equal to self-study.
4. The aim of learner autonomy should be “life-long and efficient learners” (Pinkman, 2005. p. 12).

A separate development in language teaching, but equally important to this study, is the use of blogs. They enable learners to communicate without constraints of time and space. A blog is defined by Pinkman as:

an easy to maintain online journal that can provide foreign language learners a venue in which they can reflect, comment, question, review, and communicate outside the classroom in an authentic environment. (Pinkman, 2005. p. 13)

The ease with which learners communicate and the authenticity of the environment are two key features of any blogging software on the Internet. In a similar vein, Bloch observes that teachers see blogging as:

a simple and low cost way of giving students access to publishing and distributing their writing on the Internet, as a method of providing them with the experience of writing in a digital format, and as a means of discussing issues related to their classroom work and their lives. (Bloch, 2007, p. 128)

One of the most significant aspects of blogs is comment writing where participants contribute to a public discussion which Bloch (2007) notes is one of the reasons blogging is popular. Such a writing activity may include reflection, questioning, and receiving and giving feedback. The feedback may concern content or language and can help learners direct their learning. Comments, ideas and feedback written on blogs are intended for a real audience which is what makes blogs highly appealing for young learners who are eager to make their voices heard by others. The openness of blogs enables learners to communicate with a variety of audiences (Bloch, 2007), whom they normally cannot reach. Moreover, blogs provide shy learners with an opportunity to express themselves (Zorko, 2007) because the absence of face-to-face communication in blogs lowers the affective filter of the learners.

Blogs also have distinct advantages as learning environments over traditional websites (Table 1). Given the advantages of blogs, there have been various attempts to integrate them into language learning and teaching, and this integration mainly involved the development of writing skills (see, for example, Alm, 2006; Blackstone, Spiri, & Naganuma, 2007; Bloch, 2007; Koçoğlu, 2009; Pinkman, 2005).

**Table 1: Blogs Versus HTML Websites  
(based on, Alm, 2006; Warschauer, 2010)**

<b>Blogs</b>	<b>Websites (HTML)</b>
Web 2.0 tool	Web 1.0 tool
Easily constructed	Can only be created by experts
Frequently updated	Less frequently updated
Higher percentage of text	Lower percentage of text
Less asymmetric	More asymmetric
Bottom-up changes (by users)	Top-down changes (by the webmaster)

### 3. Procedure

This study was conducted in the context of a blogging project launched to involve learners in online reading. The study was organised into a series of steps.

#### Step 1:

Learners received a brief explanation about the work they were about to undertake. The class was divided into three groups, each of which chose a person as the president of the group. The groups were given a two-hour learner training session. Then, the administrators were asked to register all class members on their blogs, and the rest of the class were asked to get a Wordpress username.

#### Step 2:

Learners were asked to brainstorm a list of potential activities to do and types of materials that could be inserted into the blogs. The learners produced a fairly long list including:

- Finding and reading really funny jokes, puns, riddles, amazing facts, and putting them on the blogs or providing links, forming polls to judge how funny they are
- Finding some interesting stories, reading and summarizing them, answering comprehension questions, guessing what happens next
- Listening to songs in audio and video format
- Telling friends about daily activities
- Doing research about useful web sites to learn elementary English
- Editing friends' posts and writing comments
- Doing on-line grammar/vocabulary exercises
- Providing the links of related on-line grammar and vocabulary exercises
- Solving puzzles and introducing them to peers
- Using on-line dictionaries
- Watching videos on various topics
- Using emoticon, pictures with text or captions
- Extending on a specific day's class work

### Step 3:

In the first few weeks of the study, there were some deadlines for particular tasks to accustom learners to visiting the blogs on a regular basis. The tasks were assigned by the teacher or the learners did some tasks based on a pre-arranged list of potential activities. In either case, they were checked by the teacher to ensure deadlines were observed. Working with a peer or individually, the participants completed the tasks assigned, checked each other's work, and sometimes wrote comments. Through doing these tasks, the learners contributed to the gradual developments of the blogs.

## 3.1 Participants

17 elementary adult learners (9 female and 8 male) participated in the study. Since most of these learners were also beginners in terms of computer literacy and overall English proficiency, the researchers held a two-hour learner training session on how to create and use blogs. Despite this initial training, it took a long time for participants to adapt to the learning environment. Some of the learners confessed that they had previously used the Internet only for a limited number of purposes like e-mail correspondence or visiting social networking sites like Facebook or Netlog.

## 3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using a questionnaire and a post-task structured interview. Observation notes taken by the class teacher also provided useful insight into the overall on-line learning experience.

The questionnaire contained two sections. The first consisted of a five-point Likert scale with 6 items focusing on how learners felt about the overall blogging experience and some specific points regarding the steps involved in the process. The second section used a semantic differential scale with 6 bi-polar adjectives to ask participants about the individual steps of the blogging experience and their ideas and feelings about the whole process. A semantic differential scale was used to eliminate the possibility of constructing items which are prone to frequent misunderstanding by the respondents. This is because it is fairly easy to rate a concept or idea by means of two adjectives which are at the two ends of a continuum. Items began with either the positive or negative adjective to avoid automatic responding on the part of the learners. Questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS 15.0.

The post-event structured interview consisted of three questions about the overall experience, challenges involved, and likes and dislikes.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

This section examines findings from the viewpoint of learners in relation to the challenges of implementation, the language learning experience and the perceived value of virtual learning environments.

### 4.1 Findings from the questionnaire

The learners found most of the activities enjoyable (Table 2). They enjoyed being blog authors and dealing with audio and video materials. Apparently, this shows that writing for a particular audience makes writing activities meaningful; therefore, enjoyable and desirable on the part of the learners. Knowing that their posts can be

seen by any visitor, they became more motivated to write. It appears that the element of task authenticity contributed to the overall motivational value of the activities.

**Table 2: The Element of Joy in Creating and Developing Blogs**

Items		Very Boring	Boring	Somewhat Boring	Average	Somewhat Enjoyable	Enjoyable	Very Enjoyable
Learning to make blogs was...	F	0	0	1	4	3	8	1
	%	0	0	5.9	23.5	17.6	47.1	5.9
Being a blog author was...	F	0	0	1	1	4	5	6
	%	0	0	5.9	5.9	23.5	29.4	35.3
Reading my friends' posts was...	F	0	1	1	6	2	2	5
	%	0	5.9	5.9	35.3	11.8	11.8	29.4
Checking my friends' writing was...	F	1	1	3	4	0	5	3
	%	5.9	5.9	17.6	23.5	0	29.4	17.6
The whole experience of blogging was...	F	0	0	0	2	4	5	6
	%	0	0	0	11.8	23.5	29.4	35.3
Selecting audio and video materials was...	F	0	1	2	0	2	8	4
	%	0	5.9	11.8	0	11.8	47.1	23.5
Selecting reading texts was...	F	1	1	2	0	3	7	3
	%	5.9	5.9	11.8	0	17.6	41.2	17.6

N = 17; F = Frequency; % = Proportion of whole group (reported for ease of comparison not statistical analysis).

It is interesting to note that the respondents experienced some difficulties such as the selection of texts and materials (Table 3). Despite these difficulties they also appreciated the value of some aspects of the blogging project such as being a real author and creating something (compare Table 2 and 3). As the classroom observations indicated, the challenges involved in materials selection also involved the difficulty in reaching audio or video material or texts with appropriate language level. To solve such a problem, the learners were provided with some web addresses where they could find suitable materials in terms of content and language. Despite this support, some learners still had problems regarding this issue, especially at the initial stages of the project.

Some learners do not like producing something. This is probably because production activity entails the use of deep thinking processes. It is apparent from Table 4 that the activities viewed as uninteresting by some learners necessitate such thinking

processes except for the activities that involve mere reading. Even the activity of checking someone's work compels the checker to come up with a good analysis of the written work and to be aware of the mistakes or errors. That is, to explain the deficiencies necessitates thinking. This may have been why some learners found some of the activities uninteresting.

**Table 3: The Difficulties Involved**

Items		Very Difficult	Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Average	Somewhat Easy	Easy	Very Easy
Learning to make blogs was...	F	0	3	1	8	2	2	1
	%	0	17.6	5.9	47.1	11.8	11.8	5.9
Being a blog author was...	F	0	2	0	4	5	6	0
	%	0	11.8	0	23.5	29.4	35.3	0
Selecting audio and video materials was...	F	0	5	1	2	4	2	3
	%	0	29.4	5.9	11.8	23.5	11.8	17.6
Selecting reading texts was...	F	0	6	2	0	1	5	3
	%	0	35.3	11.8	0	5.9	29.4	17.6

N = 17; F = Frequency; % = Proportion of whole group (reported for ease of comparison not statistical analysis).

**Table 4: Uninteresting Versus Interesting**

Items		Very Uninteresting	Uninteresting	Somewhat Uninteresting	Average	Somewhat Interesting	Interesting	Very Interesting
Being a blog author was...	F	1	2	2	2	5	4	1
	%	5.9	11.8	11.8	11.8	29.4	23.5	5.9
Reading my friends' posts was...	F	0	1	4	2	3	2	5
	%	0	5.9	23.5	11.8	17.6	11.8	29.4
Checking my friends' writing was...	F	0	5	2	1	1	6	2
	%	0	29.4	11.8	5.9	5.9	35.3	11.8
The whole experience of blogging was...	F	0	0	0	3	6	4	4
	%	0	0	0	17.6	35.3	23.5	23.5

N = 17; F = Frequency; % = Proportion of whole group (reported for ease of comparison not statistical analysis).

Two-thirds of the respondents viewed this blogging experience as “useful” or “very useful” (Table 5). This obviously signals a positive attitude towards the use of blogs in language learning and teaching. The classroom observations showed that those learners with a negative attitude towards the use of blogging also had difficulties regarding computer skills. The lack of these skills may have negatively affected the learner perceptions of the blogging experience.

The idea of being an author whose work can be read by anyone in the world was supported by almost all of the learners (Table 6). It is clear that the blogging experience, in particular being a blog author, was something creative for the majority of the learners. Creativity boosted their motivation to write and read posts on the blogs. This supports the notion that learners are motivated by the authenticity of writing for a real audience.

**Table 5: The Quality of Usefulness**

Items		Very Useless	Useless	Somewhat Useless	Average	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
Reading my friends' posts was...	F	0	0	1	4	1	7	4
	%	0	0	5.9	23.5	5.9	41.2	23.5
The whole experience of blogging was...	F	1	1	0	4	0	5	6
	%	5.9	5.9	0	23.5	0	29.4	35.3

N = 17; F = Frequency; % = Proportion of whole group (reported for ease of comparison not statistical analysis).

**Table 6: The Level of Difficulty**

Items		Very Uncreative	Uncreative	Somewhat Uncreative	Average	Somewhat Creative	Creative	Very Creative
Being a blog author was...	F	0	0	2	1	2	4	8
	%	0	0	11.8	5.9	11.8	23.5	47.1
The whole experience of blogging was...	F	0	0	1	0	5	4	6
	%	0	0	5.9	0	29.4	23.5	35.3

N = 17; F = Frequency; % = Proportion of whole group (reported for ease of comparison not statistical analysis).

As a part of peer evaluation activities, the learners checked each other's posts and sometimes wrote comments on them. These comments concerned their ideas about the content or language including grammatical errors or mistakes. Almost all learners thought that editing others' work was instructive; that is, they learned while checking

(Table 7). It is encouraging that although some learners thought that checking friends' posts was somewhat boring (Table 2 and Table 4), most of them clearly saw the pedagogical value of such an activity.

**Table 7: Learners' Ideas on the Instructiveness of Checking Each Other's Writing**

Items		Very Un-instructive	Un-instructive	Somewhat Un-instructive	Average	Somewhat Instructive	Instructive	Very Instructive
		Checking my friends' writing was...	F	1	1	0	2	2
	%	5.9	5.9	0	11.8	11.8	17.6	47.1

N = 17; F = Frequency; % = Proportion of whole group (reported for ease of comparison not statistical analysis).

The questionnaire also provided evidence that learners perceived the blogging experience as contributing to their autonomy (Table 8).

**Table 8: Learners' View of the Blogging Experience**

		Strongly Agree	Agree	No Idea	Disagree	Strongly Agree
This blogging experience helped me to work autonomously on the Internet.	F	7	7	2	1	0
This blogging experience helped me to work autonomously on the Internet.	%	41.2	41.2	11.8	5.9	0
I became more self-confident about learning English on the Internet.	F	6	7	2	2	0
I became more self-confident about learning English on the Internet.	%	35.3	41.2	11.8	11.8	0
I believe that with the help of this blogging work, I took a few steps in learning English on my own.	F	4	10	3	0	0
I believe that with the help of this blogging work, I took a few steps in learning English on my own.	%	23.5	58.8	17.6	0	0

N = 17; F = Frequency; % = Proportion of whole group (reported for ease of comparison not statistical analysis).

## 4.2 Findings from the interview

The post-task structured interview consisted of three open-ended questions:

1. In the overall sense, how do you evaluate this blogging experience?
2. What are the challenges involved during the process of signing up for and developing blogs?
3. What aspect(s) of the blogging experience did you like or hate?

A summary of responses to these questions follows:

### **How the learners evaluate the blogging experience**

- I came to realise that communicating on the Internet is something useful.
- Lack of enough computer knowledge led to the inability to adapt quickly.
- It was nice to see what our friends wrote on the blogs regardless of time and location.
- From now on I can make blogs and write in blogs by others.
- It was a useful experience in terms of language learning.
- It was instructive and enjoyable.
- I enjoyed browsing my friends' blogs.
- I really liked some of the things that my friends shared.
- It was really nice to produce something on my own.
- I saw some useful functions of computers with the help of this blogging activity.
- Although we had difficulties at the beginning, we got accustomed to it and improved our English.
- It was difficult to undertake the responsibility of an "admin." but I began to enjoy the experience as the time passed.
- I had difficulties at first because I am a real technophobic person.
- My negative attitude towards English and the Internet negatively affected my work. But I still took part in the activity.

### **The challenges involved during the process of signing up for and developing blogs**

- Registering on and developing blogs
- Selecting appropriate materials
- Low-level English proficiency
- Inability to use computers and the Internet efficiently (lack of computer literacy and electronic skills)
- Gaining access to the Internet
- Difficulties adding external links to blogs (e.g. linking to YouTube videos)

### **The aspect(s) of the blogging experience learners liked or disliked**

-Liked:

- Working together and sharing ideas
- Editing their friends' posts
- Reading comments on their posts
- Reading jokes and stories
- Doing research to find some materials

-Disliked:

- Having to work with lazy students
- Difficulty in gaining access to the Internet
- Browsing web pages with difficult language



The interview data reveals some valuable findings about the challenges involved. Most significantly, learners enjoyed the experience in general although they faced some difficulties. They felt that they learned something new by using computers for tasks other than ordinary functions among teenagers. The most striking difficulty mentioned was the inability to use computers effectively although by the end of the project some learners seemed to have overcome this technophobia to a certain extent. This implies that before undertaking such a project, teachers should make sure that their learners are reasonably computer literate and conversant with the internet.

Although decision-making is a significant component of learner autonomy, it is clear that most of the learners were not ready to make decisions. However, in performing the tasks on the blogs the learners had the chance to make decisions about:

1. The appearance and the content of the blog
2. What reading texts to select
3. What to write about and how to present information

Teacher should endeavour to give students decision-making rights.

## 5. Conclusions

This study reports on 17 adult learners using an asynchronous online communication medium to find out how useful blogs can be in motivating learners to learn English autonomously. The learners undertook either free activities aimed at developing their linguistic skills or in Oxford's (2008) words "a relatively independent supplement" to daily class work (p. 58). In both cases, the learners added their overall ability to act independently and to take decisions. Moreover, extensive reading was naturally integrated because the participants when confronted with the task of choosing a text (e.g. a joke or story) had to read several texts to find a suitable one. In other words, simple as it may seem, the task of copying a story from the Internet inherently includes the process of selecting one of a number of alternatives.

The problems encountered by the learners were mostly related to the use of technology. Similarly, the proficiency of the learners sometimes limited them especially in terms of selecting materials as the content of their blogs, doing research on the internet and expressing themselves. This is to be expected because of the proficiency level of the learners. It may be unfair to expect high levels of autonomy from beginners if it is assumed the level of autonomy increases as proficiency does. This study shows that despite some problems, blogging seems to be motivating because the learners really enjoyed being creative and writing for a specific audience. This study is based on a small number of participants. A useful next step in this area of research would be to use the lessons learned from this study to pursue similar research questions with a larger group of participants.

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## Learner Autonomy and Computers in a Mexican Self-Access Centre

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### Abstract

This research paper analyses the work students do in the self-access centre of the School of Languages in the Autonomous University of Baja California, specifically in the computer area, in order to determine the practices students are developing, and how these practices are helping them develop their independent learning. Although in this centre computers are perceived as helpful tools for autonomous language learning, there had previously been no studies to verify this perception.

This qualitative research is based on observations and interviews of students who use the computer area in two self-access centres in the School of Languages in Tecate and in Tijuana. The study evaluates the academic use of computers and determines whether computers help students develop independent language learning.

**Key words:** computers, languages, independent learning, self-access centres, research, Mexican adult learners

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### 1. Introduction

The main objective of the project reported here is to determine how computers help students' learning in the self-access centres (SACs) in the School of Languages of the Autonomous University of Baja California in the cities of Tijuana and Tecate. The SACs are equipped with video recorders, tape recorders, CD players, DVD players and computers. The centres serve around 1,500 students in Tijuana and 600 in Tecate every semester. Since the establishment of the SACs there has been a great expectation about how computers would be seen as a tool for learning languages and how students would use them in relation to learning.

## 1.1 Context

The SACs in Tijuana and Tecate are considered places where students can practice and learn languages with an emphasis on practising and bettering their grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral production, writing and pronunciation through the use of different materials and equipment. Students make their own decisions about what to practice, in which area, in which way and for how long. The idea is for them to choose whatever materials (worksheets, DVDs, CDs, magazines, movies, newspapers, software, games and so on). they wish, that will adapt to their learning needs and styles and make them feel comfortable.

The phases that the SACs lead students through contribute to their self-development and also to independent learning through active participation in their own learning and the interaction they have with other students, tutors, materials and equipment. The phases are:

1. Students are asked to explore their centre to discover the many possibilities of practicing and learning within a flexible schedule
2. Students can work at their own pace, in their own time and learn to learn by themselves
3. As students gain self-confidence, they learn to make their own decisions
4. Students guide their conversation workshops on their own

The SACs at the Language Schools are divided into different areas: reception, tutoring rooms, conversation rooms, video, audio, reading and writing and the computer room. The latter is equipped with multimedia computers which have internet access. This area is the focus of our research.

## 1.2 Objective of the research project

The Autonomous University of Baja California constantly encourages academic staff and students to make use of the technology available and provides a specific budget to meet the technological needs of students in classes or learning centres. The university has invested in technology for the SACs because it is believed that students learn better through the use of technology and because students seem to enjoy the use of technology. However, it is also speculated by some within the university that students are not learning enough through technology or that they are not taking full advantage of the resources. This study was conceived to determine the extent to which computers are being used and if their use is promoting independent learning.

More specifically, through observation and interviews this study examines the practices students develop while using the computer area of the SACs and whether the computer area support independent learning. An analysis of the data will provide:

- A description of the activities of students in the computer area
- An explanation of those activities
- An identification of independent learning activities students engage in

## 2. The Literature

### 2.1 Computers in language learning

Computers integrate different technologies combining video, audio, text and graphics (commonly called multimedia). They have helped language learners since the early

1990s when Moore (1992) suggested they give users a level of interaction which no other tool gives them, making them more attractive for students. She also said computers are excellent for teamwork because they allow students to interact with each other. Computers are also an excellent resource for autonomous learning because they allow students to decide what they are going to learn, the options they are going to use, for how long and when (Brett, 1995), and when used in tutor-mode they give personalized and immediate feedback (Hoven, 1999).

When connected to the internet, computers provide access to both authentic communication opportunities like chat rooms, e-mail, and forums with people that speak the target language; and a multitude of materials specifically designed for language learning. This allows students to choose the activities they want to engage in, how much they want to do and the extent to which they want to interact with the target language and culture. However, a key issue flagged near the advent of the internet, and still relevant today, is the degree to which teachers can be sure that “student time spent in the internet is productive in terms of language learning” (Windeatt, Hardisty, & Eastment, 2000, p. 5).

Students need to learn how to exploit technology resources to the best learning advantage and teachers must guide students towards that understanding.

## 2.2 Autonomous learning and language learning

Autonomous learning has been defined by several authors as the capacity for students to control their own learning (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Sinclair, 2000). This is seen as a situation where it is required that the student becomes responsible (Sinclair, 2000) and with a positive attitude towards studying. Littlewood (1996) identifies two components in order for a student to take charge of learning: willingness and ability. To achieve autonomous learning the student needs to have knowledge, skills, motivation and self-confidence.

In the context in which this study took place, Tunnerman (2003), a university researcher states that, the role of teachers and students need to change in Latin America to keep up with the academic changes. Students need to be reflective, active, participative, creative, and independent and in addition to this they need to learn to be, know, do, communicate and learn to learn. He also mentions that autonomous learning needs to be included in all teaching methodologies. This form of learning becomes a required tool to advance in the new society.

## 3. Methodology

This research project is based on a qualitative methodology, which allows us to explore perceptions and processes in context. Nunan (1992) defines this type of research as “an intention to explain what is happening in a particular scenario” (p. 77).

### 3.1 The participants

The participants were 40 students registered to work in the SACs including university students, professionals, housewives, and in the SAC in Tecate also teenagers. Participation was voluntarily.

## 3.2 The instruments

To carry out this project three types of research tools were used; questionnaires, observations and interviews. Questionnaires were used for the administrative advantages of being applied to many people at the same time and providing much information (Mills, 2003), and providing data that is easy to manage. Observations and interviews were used for more in-depth data of fewer participants.

The 10-question questionnaire aimed at ascertaining students' practices in the computer area. It was applied to all 40 students and provided information about:

- Why students chose to use computers
- The programs students liked to work with
- How students used the internet
- The type of exercises students looked for on the internet
- Abilities students have improved through the use of computers
- Availability and access to computers
- Any other comments students wished to share

Eight of the students, 4 in Tijuana and 4 in Tecate, were selected for observation and then an interview. Of these 8 students, 4 were university students, 1 a high school student and 3 were over 25 years old and working in companies. The observations recorded the students' practices in the computer area. The interviews explored in greater depth students' reasons for adopting those practices.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Questionnaire

The main reasons students gave for using the computer area in the SACs were: that it makes their learning easier, there is a wide variety of exercises, they learn to pronounce, they listen to other people using the target language, they increase their knowledge, they develop their vocabulary, they learn and practice other abilities, the SAC provides support for the learning of grammar and listening comprehension and moreover it gives them easy access to information.

Students also mentioned that their main access to computers is at home or at the SAC. The majority of students stated that they preferred the use of educational software to learn a language rather than the internet. Among the most popular programs available on the computers are: Triple Play, American Shine, Aprendamos Ingles, Encarta Kids and TOEFL. The students consider these programs to be interactive, entertaining, didactic and easy to use.

With regard to the use of the internet, it was found that not all students preferred it, only 14 out of 40 said they surf the web to learn a language and prefer web pages designed for learning English. Some of the pages they mentioned are:

- [www.betterenglish.com](http://www.betterenglish.com)
- [www.discover.com](http://www.discover.com)
- [www.edufind.com/english/grammar/toc.cfm](http://www.edufind.com/english/grammar/toc.cfm)
- [www.englishclub.com](http://www.englishclub.com)
- [www.englishforum.com](http://www.englishforum.com)

- [www.eslcafe.com](http://www.eslcafe.com)
- [www.historychannel.com](http://www.historychannel.com)
- [www.iht.com](http://www.iht.com)
- [www.mansioningles.com](http://www.mansioningles.com)
- [www.ohio.edu/esl/grammar](http://www.ohio.edu/esl/grammar)
- [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org), [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com)
- [www.quia.com/dir/eng/](http://www.quia.com/dir/eng/)
- [www.whitehouse.go](http://www.whitehouse.go)

The majority of students look for exercises of the following type on computers: grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, listening comprehension and games.

## 4.2 Observations

During the observations student used pronunciation, listening comprehension, and vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension exercises. Students were observed selecting a program, reading or listening to the instructions and working through the exercises (which involved reading/listening to a text, repeating/writing or selecting a correct option depending on the activities). The instruction and exercises were in English although in some exercises students had the option to obtain an explanation in Spanish (mother tongue) or translations. Two of the students were observed listening to and singing songs. The programs that students worked on were interactive. Students were observed through a full cycle of deciding which program they wanted to work with, which exercises to do, how to answer them and how long to work for.

Most of the students that were observed demonstrated confidence in what they were doing, they knew how to work the menus and the different functions the program had and selected the exercises without hesitation. One exception was a student who surfed and explored the programs to see how they worked for almost fifteen minutes of the fifty minutes she was in the computer area. The rest of the time she did some exercises, which she sometimes did not finish. This may be because there was no one in the area that could help her or there were no clear instruction on how to work the programs. This student looked very concerned during her work in the computer area; she couldn't understand the functions of the buttons and the menu.

## 4.3 Interviews

The interviews explored the attitudes of the students in relation to learning English, their beliefs on how to learn English, their perceptions of the SAC and their opinions about their own work in the computer area.

With regard to their attitudes towards learning English, they mentioned that they like the language; it represents personal growth and professional development. For example:

Because it is good for professional development, to know more, knowing more languages gives you more opportunities. Well in the job.

Intrinsic as well as instrumental motivation was also identified through some comments. For example:

Well I do not know, it sounds good.

Well it seems easy, ....

In addition is good to know more things it increases your culture.

Beliefs on learning English were also detected through the interviews. Students believe that they learn better if they are immersed in a place where they speak the target language, or if they practice, listen, watch and read it. They also valued learning English with trained people and authentic materials. They mentioned that to learn a language you need dedication and practice, for example:

Practice more speaking and listen to more English ... .. to make my world English.

Students' perception of the SAC is of a place that facilitates learning, which allows the practice of the language and the review of what they have learnt in class. They appreciate the atmosphere of the SAC, the diversity and variety of materials and activities it offers. Examples of their comments are:

I like the atmosphere ... is very peaceful...

That we can do many things, because it is a varied place and with material that help us a lot

And you can learn what you want. Because there is much variety

The majority of participants stated that what they like most about the computer area is that they can watch movies (in the case of Tecate) or learn a language.

The interviews also revealed the influence of teachers in students' attendance at the SAC. Students stated they attended the SAC because it was a requirement established by their teacher and that they had gone to the computer area as a suggestion from their teacher. On the other hand, others stated that they had attended out of personal interest, because it was entertaining or because it supported their language learning.

Students' choice of the activities observed was for the following reasons: they like them, because it was suggested by the teacher or their classmates, to complement what they see in class.

Students believe their practices in the computer area allow them to learn the language through practice and the development of other linguistic abilities (vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, pronunciation and reading comprehension). They made comments like:

I say that they help me more to understand the language, to understand words because sometimes when a person speaks English I don't understand him very well and I believe that the words mean something else, I have to learn to identify words.



## 5. Discussion

The participants in this study said they used computers to improve their language abilities, most specifically grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation and they liked the interactive exercises, especially the games which mean that they recognize that that interaction is a good characteristic of computer exercises. The observed events showed students answering exercises to improve or practice pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary reading and listening comprehension, using interactive programs in which they have to interact with written and oral texts.

During this research it was noticed that the activities participants engaged in were largely: listen and repeat, listen and write, listen and choose; and listen, read, select and revise answers. However these mechanical activities are not consistent with the communicative approach to language learning. This suggests that the student should learn to communicate through real activities which offer information exchange with a specific purpose. The mechanical activities observed are also not consistent with the beliefs that participants expressed about being immersed in the use of the language through authentic materials. Perhaps this inconsistency is due to the influence of participants' classes in which they are practicing this type of exercise and also due to students attending the SAC as the result of a suggestion from their teachers and thus they tend to reinforce what they have seen in class.

On the other hand, the SACs provide students with opportunities for decision making in selecting their own practices: the areas they want to work on, the materials and the time dedicated to it. They enter the SAC and work in the computer room, making their own decision on to what to practice, the selection of programs, without expecting someone to tell them what to do. This suggests that students are developing autonomous strategies.

The majority of the students said that they preferred to work with educational programs, this could reflect that students feel more confident working with materials designed for learning than using materials created for native speakers such as movies and video clips. This could also reflect a lack of confidence in the knowledge they have acquire or to avoid risks. However it is important to mention that two of the students observed chose to sing songs and watch movies thus taking the risk with authentic materials, doing real activities supported by their own beliefs on how to learn a language, through the use of authentic materials, to bring reality to the educational context (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Moore, 1992).

The results also show that students do not make much use of the internet. This indicates a lack of interest in the internet despite expert claims of the excellent opportunities to learn language with sophisticated resources according to the students' needs and with authentic communication (Murray, 2007). Some students believe that the internet is a waste of time because they cannot find what they need or want. The SAC has a menu with web pages, which students can access in the computer area, however some of the students do not know how to use them and this discourages them from using the internet.

It was also found that students who do not know how to work the programs or have basic computer skills found it difficult to work in the computer area. This can discourage students new to the technology. One solution is to ask such students to

work with more technology-literate partners. After all, autonomous learning does not mean working alone, it is interaction with others (Sinclair, 2010).

## 6. Conclusion

This study provided a picture of what students do in the computer area of a self-access centre and some insights into why. It revealed student preferences and most notably less use of the internet than might have been assumed.

Most importantly, the study shows that the computer area promotes decision making because students have to take responsibility for their learning by making their own decisions about programs, language skills, exercises amount of work. However, decision making depends on the knowledge and abilities the students have of the materials and the use of the equipment; and can be influenced by class teachers through the practices they demonstrate in class and the suggestions for self-access work they make.

This study provides a starting point for further studies into the practices of self-access learners in the computer area of SACs and suggests that further enquiry is needed specifically in the metacognitive area.

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