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AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

New Research Agendas

Edited by
**Alice Chik, Naoko Aoki
and Richard Smith**



Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching

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Richard Smith
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Introduction

Alice Chik, Naoko Aoki, and Richard Smith

Abstract This introductory chapter provides background to and outlines the main arguments for exploring new research agendas in autonomy in language learning and teaching research. As research on autonomy in language teaching and learning approaches the four-decade mark, the field is rapidly moving in different directions. However, the most recent overview of the field was published ten years ago (Benson, *Lang Teach* 40:21–40, 2007). Picking up from Benson’s (Lang Teach 40:21–40, 2007) state-of-the-art article, this introductory chapter overviews various relatively recent developments in autonomy research with learners and with teachers and briefly summarizes the contribution of each chapter.

Keywords Learner autonomy • Research agenda

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Ten years ago, Benson's comprehensive review of research into autonomy in language learning and teaching (Benson, 2007) showed that the field was flourishing and outlined several future research directions. The first involved expanding the definition of autonomy to cater better for social processes. Secondly, Benson also suggested greater exploration of relationships between autonomy and other student-focused constructs such as self-regulation, self-motivation, agency and identity. Finally, he argued for a stronger base for empirical understanding of the various ways autonomy is actualized in different contexts and settings. These suggestions were proposed in response to the emerging research trends in the field at the time. Since 2007, while the field of autonomy is still flourishing, we have witnessed changing perspectives on language learning and teaching in general. New research agendas are needed.

There are various detailed definitions of learner autonomy, but for this chapter, we will start with the definition of it as 'the capacity to take control of one's learning' (Benson, 2011, 58). Inevitably, questions about who, what, when, where and why emerged. Who is taking control? Taking (or retaking) this control from whom? What types of control? When do the learners exercise control? And in what places and spaces do learners take control? Clearly, such questions invite further exploration and thinking about new dimensions of autonomy.

In this volume, the order of chapters to some extent matches the order of these who, what, when, where and why questions. The first chapter addresses the question of how suitable the concept of autonomy is in developing countries and under-resourced learning and teaching contexts. 'For whom is it feasible and desirable?', in other words. Then we see how language teachers and social censure might impact on conceptualizations of autonomy. Another, less frequently discussed dimension of autonomy is group and group dynamics. The reimagination of groups in the discourse on learner autonomy also brings into question the fundamental nature of interaction and space. In our contemporary world, the most popular spaces for group interaction are certainly digital rather than physical. As we rethink new learning affordances, a discussion of spatial dimensions provides much needed expansion in the field.

Autonomy has been argued to be a Western concept, but Aoki and Smith (1999), Littlewood (1999) and others have disputed this falsely constructed binary with regard to East Asian contexts. Instead, these writers argue, autonomy needs to take into consideration the characteristics and needs of learners in specific contexts, and learners should not be

stereotyped. Expanding the discussion further, Smith, Kuchah and Lamb in this volume critically examine the relevance of the concept of autonomy in developing countries. Rather than viewing autonomy as culturally limited, they propose availability of *resources* as a critical criterion for engagement of learners and teachers with autonomy. Developing countries differ in cultural, social, linguistic, religious, political and educational systems, but one commonly shared factor could well be a constraint on resources for language learning and teaching. From this starting point, Smith, Kuchah and Lamb outline various perspectives for understanding of and research into autonomy.

Of course, resources are not the only constraint. Autonomy also involves interdependence between learners and teachers. What happens when teachers feel that they not only have to deal with institutional constraints (e.g. curriculum, public examinations) but also social censure? Gao, in his chapter, discusses impacts of public scrutiny and censure on teachers' professional identities and sense of autonomy. Public censure of teachers is increasingly gaining traction in the media, especially in teaching contexts where English is viewed as an important tool for academic and social advancement. In addition, with the ever-prevailing permeation of social media platforms, the general public also appears to have extremely high expectation for language teachers beyond their professional duties. This might have been tended to be true in East Asian contexts, especially in countries where there are clashes between more traditional Confucian expectations and modern education consumerism. Gao provides a detailed discussion with examples drawn from Hong Kong and China and suggests possible ways forward.

Another dimension in autonomy that has raised questions is the role of groups. By association, autonomy has often been framed as a learner's lone quest to forge his/her learning journey. The concept of 'group' may appear to counter that of autonomy, but in his chapter here, Palfreyman examines different facets of groups, grouping and group dynamics to argue for their benefit in fostering autonomy among learners. This is an especially important issue to consider as contemporary learning theories emphasize that learning does not just happen within the learner. Learning happens from interaction and that requires consideration to be given not only to contexts but also other learners in the learning environment. In addition, institutional learning is still pretty much designed for groups of learners, not necessarily individually tailored. So the examination of groups in the conceptualization and development of autonomy is essential.