



What's new in autonomy?

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This article describes the process Phil Benson went through when writing the second edition of his *Teaching and researching autonomy*, which includes three new areas: sociocultural implications of autonomy, teacher autonomy, and autonomy and new technologies. It will whet our appetites for his plenary at JALT2011 on *Autonomy in language teaching and learning: How to do it "here"* where he will present a framework that teachers can use to evaluate constraints on autonomy in their workplaces and suggest a number of techniques that they can use to work within and around these constraints.

本論では、自著 *Teaching and Researching Autonomy* (第2版) の執筆過程について述べ、3つの新領域、つまり、自律の社会文化面への示唆、教師の自律、自律と新しい技術について語る。これはJALT2011での著者の基調講演 *Autonomy in language teaching and learning: How to do it "here"* への興味を喚起するものである。本講演では、教師が自分の現場での自律の制約を見直すための枠組みを示し、そのような制約の中で利用可能なテクニックを提案する

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We all know how difficult it has become to keep up with the latest research. The number of publications increases year by year while the pressure for academics to publish regularly makes it difficult to separate articles written because the author really has something to say from articles written mainly to meet publication targets. For that reason, I will remember the years 2009 and 2010 as a time when, in order to prepare a second edition of *Teaching and researching autonomy* (Benson, 2011), I tried to read anything and everything that had been written on autonomy since the turn of the century. The important thing about revising a book, I was told, is to make the new material blend in with the old. Readers who are coming to the book for the first time are interested in what you have to say on your topic, not in what has changed since the previous edition. People who have read the first edition, however, have asked what is new in the second edition, and in this article, I want to take that question as a starting point for some reflections on the bigger question of what has and has not changed in our thinking about autonomy itself over the past decade.

What isn't new?

When I say that I *tried to* read everything written on autonomy since 2000, I am really admitting a failure of a kind. I intended to read everything, but I was only dimly aware of what that would mean. As it turned out, it meant reviewing thirty edited books and journal special issues devoted to autonomy and related topics in addition to numerous articles published elsewhere. Internet search engines led me to a range of publications on autonomy in medicine and nursing, bioethics, genetics, the law, feminist scholarship, artificial intelligence, and business and organizational management. I also discovered something of a boom in writing on the philosophy of autonomy over the past two decades. I was forced to be selective and, although the blurb on the back of the book advertises more than three hundred new references, these are but the tip of the iceberg of references that could have been included.

The book also mentions three new topics—sociocultural implications of autonomy, teacher autonomy, and autonomy and new technologies—that I will come to shortly. First, I want to ask how much is really new in all of this work. The boom in philosophical writing tells us that the idea of autonomy dates back to the 18th century, but our present-day concern with autonomy has a very modern character. In fact, little has been written on the philosophy of autonomy between then and now and present-day writing essentially represents a revival of interest in the idea as a counterpoint to post-modern deconstruction of the individual self. Present-day interest in autonomy in language learning, similarly, reflects concern with the meaning and impact of language learning on students whose individuality is suppressed in modern mass educational systems. Yet we can also trace this interest back to the 1970s (Gremmo & Riley, 1995), which raises the question of what has been retained from those days. Here, I want to mention two

ideas that have remained constant, at least in the revision of my work: the basic definition of autonomy and the basic claims that we make for it.

On the basic definition of learner autonomy, there has been a remarkable degree of consensus around the idea that autonomy involves learners taking more control over their learning. In recent work, this definition is also often linked to the philosophical idea of personal autonomy, which involves people struggling for greater control over the course of their lives. In the light of the recent application of the philosophy of autonomy to a variety of areas of human activity, we might also come to see language learner autonomy as a specific form of personal autonomy within our own field. At the same time, we recognize that autonomy is multidimensional and takes many different forms according to the person, the setting, and multiple contextual and micro-contextual factors. Learners display autonomy in very different ways, which allows for a variety of views of the kinds of autonomy that should be aimed at in particular contexts. The proliferation of studies on autonomy inside and outside the language classroom, therefore, reflects the proliferation of settings and contexts for language learning and leads to multiple variations on what is essentially the same idea of autonomy as the capacity to take charge of one's learning. This core definition of autonomy has proved remarkably resilient as a focal point for theory and practice; especially so, I would argue, when compared to related ideas, such as learning strategies and motivation, which are seemingly "endangered" by rival ideas, such as "self-regulation" (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006) and "investment" (Norton Pierce, 1995) at the present time.

There has also been a good deal of consensus on the major claims we make for autonomy, of which, according to both the first and second editions of the book, there are three: (a) language learners *naturally* tend to take control of their learning, (b) learners who lack autonomy are *capable of developing* it, and (c) autonomous language learning is *more effective* than non-autonomous language learning. These claims are crucial to the health of the idea of autonomy, because they relate to the *reality* of autonomy, on the one hand, and to the feasibility and

value of educational interventions that aim to foster it, on the other. If any of these claims were proven to be false, it would be hard to justify a focus on autonomy in language teaching and learning. Most of the recent research studies do, in fact, address one or more of these claims: they describe autonomous learning in various settings and assess the ways in which educational interventions foster autonomy and better language learning. We might hope for a more comprehensive description of autonomous language learning behaviour and its underlying principles, more analysis of failed attempts to foster autonomy, and more studies providing evidence of impact on the quality of language learning. Nevertheless, none of the three claims have been repudiated and, on the contrary, the evidence in support of them accumulates year by year.

What is new?

At the same time, our thinking on autonomy has not stood still and, in addition to research on the core issues of language learner autonomy, there has also been work in new areas, among which three particularly stand out.

Sociocultural implications of autonomy

The shift towards more *social* ways of thinking about language teaching, learning, and use has, perhaps, been the most important development in the field of language education over the past decade (Block, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1997). This shift has involved the import of new approaches (notably Vygotskian "sociocultural" theory and situated learning theory), the conceptualization of classrooms and other teaching and learning arrangements in terms of social context and community, and a questioning of the ways in which second language acquisition theory has separated cognition from social context. The idea of autonomy has also been subject to critique for its focus on the individual learner (e.g., Toohey, 2007), although advocates of autonomy have tended to side-step this critique by insisting that autonomy is a social construct that implies interdependence rather than independence. Indeed, the process of exploring more social or collaborative approaches to fostering autonomy predates the *social turn* in language teaching and

learning more generally and is linked to a shift in the focus of attention from out-of-class language learning and self-instruction to autonomy in the classroom which began in the late 1980s. In the recent research, fostering autonomy is no longer primarily a matter of individualizing learning through out-of-class initiatives, and classroom-based approaches clearly predominate. In areas such as self-access and distance education, where there has traditionally been a focus on individualization of learning, there has also been a shift towards exploration of more collaborative approaches. This social turn also represents a point of tension within research on autonomy, however, because there is a sense in which the idea of autonomy lacks meaning if it does not involve some element of individual development and some element of helping individuals to match learning activities to their own preferences and needs.

Teacher autonomy

The idea of teacher autonomy is also a product of the 1990s (Benson & Huang, 2008; Little, 1995) that has grown to maturity in the past decade. It is linked to the social turn in language education, which has involved a re-evaluation of the role of teachers and teaching in language learning, in that it draws upon the idea of autonomy as interdependence (in this case the interdependence of teachers and learners). There is also a certain historical logic to this development, as autonomy has moved from being a marginal idea pursued by committed but often isolated teachers to one that now plays a role in language education policy and curriculum development in many parts of the world. This broadening of interest in autonomy has led to the essentially new problem of training teachers, who often lack an initial commitment to the idea of autonomy, to foster autonomy among their students in mass education programmes. Interest in teacher autonomy has thus involved new areas of practice, especially in pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher development. Teacher autonomy has also proved to be a somewhat problematic concept, as it is difficult to define independently of learner autonomy, on the one hand, and the classroom context, on the other. The idea that learner autonomy is dependent on

teacher autonomy is especially problematic in as much as it seemingly excludes the possibility of developing autonomy through out-of-class learning altogether. In out-of-class learning, a parallel area of interest has developed concerned with the practice of language advising. What matters most in language advising for autonomy, however, is the advisor's ability to help learners make informed decisions about their learning without making those decisions for them. This may also be true of fostering learner autonomy in the classroom. Whether this implies autonomous teachers—as opposed to teachers who are experienced in and knowledgeable about autonomous learning—is a question that needs to be resolved in future research.

Autonomy and new technologies

There has always been a link between educational technologies and autonomy, insofar as they have often been designed for independent use. Advocates of autonomy have sometimes been sceptical of this link, because educational technologies tend to presuppose autonomy, rather than foster it. The most recent generations of new technologies, however, especially those involving the Internet, user-generated Web 2.0 content, and mobility appear to be having a fundamental impact on the landscape of autonomous language learning (Benson & Chik, 2010). In areas such as self-access, language advising, distance education, and tandem learning, there has been a need to rethink provision of access to language and language learning opportunities through these new technologies, which has often involved a shift in focus from educational technologies as providers of content to the design of technologically-enhanced environments for independent and collaborative self-directed learning. More importantly, new technologies are providing opportunities for language learners who lack immediate access to the target language to *bypass* classrooms and go directly to target language texts and users through the Internet and social media. Many of our most basic ideas about language teaching and learning (beginning with the idea that they are best carried out in schools and classrooms) are based on the assumption that learners lack direct access to the target language and its users. Studies are

beginning to appear, however, that challenge this assumption by showing how more and more people around the world are using online resources to learn and use foreign languages in innovative ways, often without the knowledge of their teachers. One implication of these studies is, perhaps, that after a period in which the pendulum of autonomy has swung towards the classroom, we may be entering a period in which it swings back towards out-of-class learning, or at least towards the ways in which classroom teaching with students' self-directed language learning beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would say that sifting through the many interesting and informative papers on autonomy that have been published in the past decade has taught me that although much has changed, much has also remained unchanged. In comparison with other key concepts in language education, autonomy has displayed a remarkable persistence. There is a remarkable degree of cohesion in published work on autonomy, which conveys a sense of practitioners working in very different settings and contexts around the world, but with shared assumptions and shared goals. This suggests to me that autonomy in language teaching and learning is a work in progress, to which more and more practitioners are contributing year by year.

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