
The official mainstreaming of learner autonomy in secondary and tertiary language curricula around the world underlines the importance of taking a critical stance towards different theories and practices claiming learner autonomy as their ideological motivation. This volume, broadly based on a symposium at the 2002 AILA conference that investigated the concepts of both learner and teacher autonomy, provides no single view as to how such criticality can be achieved. However, the foreword by Henri Holec sets the tone by emphasising the necessity of foregoing the search for “monolithic and stable answers” and, by implication, the normative. Instead, it is at the level of localised pedagogic practice and research that the production of knowledge about autonomy in language education needs to be constantly questioned, re-worked, and reconstructed.

After the foreword by Holec, Terry Lamb provides an overview of the whole volume in Part 1. Part 2 features four papers (by Phil Benson, Turid Trebbi, Ernesto Macaro and William La Ganza) exploring the concepts of learner and/or teacher autonomy. In Part 3, there are five studies into teacher and learner perspectives on autonomy in language education (by Richard Smith & Sultan Erdoğan, Hélène Martinez, Sara Cotterall & David Crabbe, Christine Siqueira Nicolaides, Penny Hacker & Gary Barkhuizen), followed in Part 4 by four chapters (by Jonathan Shaw, Hayo Reinders & Marilyn Lewis, Flavia Vieira, Isabel Barbosa, Madalena Paisvaand & Isabel Sandra Fernandes, and Barbara Sinclair) on practices aimed at supporting the development of learner and/or teacher autonomy. Most of these sites of inquiry are university-based, located in teacher education courses (pre-service and in-service) or tertiary adult language courses and/or self-access centres (SACs). Although much of the authors’ work is situated in European contexts (England, Germany, Norway and Portugal), research from Brazil, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Thailand (but not North America) is also included. In the final part, Lamb revisits themes from across the whole volume to close with an explicitly political view of a pedagogy for autonomy.

Three overarching themes emerge: a questioning of the role of the teacher in relation to the development of learner autonomy, the uncovering and confrontation of constraints in relation to learner and teacher decision-making, and the reflective and political dimensions to autonomy projects in second language education. Benson, assuming a liberal-humanist view of personal autonomy, takes up the first theme, arguing that the perspectives which teachers and learners have on autonomy do not necessarily intersect. Teachers’ concerns with learner autonomy may often become focused on learners displaying particular desirable behaviours as institutionally legitimised in classroom learning arrangements, whereas learners’ positions towards autonomy may be connected in complex (but as yet poorly understood) ways to how they realise their personal autonomy in their broader lives beyond the classroom. Shaw’s chapter takes this argument further in claiming that it is presumptuous of teachers to wish to enable (postgraduate) learners to take control of their own learning; the teacher’s role is rather to enable them to learn language and to be able to use it for their own communicative purpose. The main problem for Shaw is how teachers can find appropriate ways to engage in critical dialogue with their workplace colleagues to question their own assumptions, beliefs and values (or internalised constraints) and how these impact on the teaching decisions they make for their learners. Yet, teachers’ readiness for critical dialogue and reflection is never a given, as the study by Nicolaides of two future teachers of English in Brazil reminds us. They each struggle within the classroom to engage with others in negotiated decision-making about their own learning and use of language.

As different authors try to confront specific internal and external constraints and theorise from practice, the reader starts to gain a more grounded view of learner and teacher decision-making in relation to autonomy.
La Ganza puts forward his own Dynamic Interrelational Space (DIS) model featuring different cognitive-affective phases of restraint that teachers and learners may go through in moving towards greater autonomy. The key phase is where the teacher encourages learners to initiate and define the learning experience, at the same time as learners seek empowerment and are willing to struggle to define their work or learning experiences for themselves. As if in response to the more sceptical positions mapped out by Benson, Shaw and the student–teachers in the Nicolaides study, the DIS model is premised on the need for both teacher and learner to recognise the constantly shifting positions, and the will to creative power, of the other. Macaro similarly presents a model of second language autonomy with three dimensions (autonomy of language competence, autonomy of language learning competence and autonomy of learner choice) to explore how teachers may support or impede the development of autonomous language use by beginning learners of a second language.

At a more practical level of constraint, Reinders and Lewis show that a simple evaluation protocol can help SAC advisors start to become more critical about how their work is constrained by the generic ‘learning to learn’ rubrics of commercially published textbooks, whereas Cotterall and Crabbe explore how teachers can use a basic problem–solution frame to engage in dialogue with learners about difficulties in language use. In reviewing a 15-year period of her own research into pro-autonomy classroom practices, curriculum policy guidelines and teacher education, Trebbi addresses the question of how a fuller range of internal and external constraints to the development of autonomy can be deconstructed, re-interpreted, and then re-worked at different levels of pedagogic innovation. She reports how teachers, like teenage learners, are unlikely to change their entrenched practices without access to carefully structured spaces where they can legitimise such changes for themselves by reflectively co-constructing and experiencing alternative ways of learning.

The reflective and political edges to autonomy projects are thrown into much sharper relief in those chapters with a particular teacher education focus. Sinclair’s chapter, for example, reveals institutional constraints which are embodied in external and internal course evaluation requirements impinging on the design and running of an MA module on learner autonomy. These appear to affect the students’ willingness to voice their own understandings and to develop exploratory discourses of their knowledge-in-the-making. Although it is tempting to attribute such reluctance to individual personality and passivity, Hacker and Backhuizen’s study points to an alternative interpretation. In their 12-week, lecture-based module on course design and teaching methodology, the fostering of reflective processes through extensive journal writing is highlighted as the means to help teachers articulate with increasing confidence their personal theories of teaching and learning. This reflectivity, they conclude, helps teachers become autonomous and be more willing to ‘engage in the kind of pedagogical dialogue needed to foster learner autonomy’. Similarly, in the inquiry by Martinez, helping teachers explore their individual subjective learning theories is seen as the critical means by which teachers may re-work awareness of their own cognition and that of others, and come to better appreciate patterns of similarity and contrast across different individuals.

Such patterns are finely pinpointed in the particularly original study by Smith and Erdöğan. Their chapter clinically unpacks conventional notions of teacher autonomy and investigates how student–teachers’ changing personal constructs map onto the development of their capacity for self-directed teacher-learning. This chapter also indicates the powerful transformative effects of binding formative teacher experiences of learner autonomy to individual action research projects within a collective undertaking, a context-sensitive approach that Vieira et al. envisage as having the potential to enable teachers to transform rather than merely reproduce dominant educational practices. Like other major studies in this volume, the insights from Vieira and her colleagues achieve trustworthiness with the reader because they spring from many years of sustained collective engagement with (and for) a pedagogy for autonomy. Their work, based in local secondary schools, consistently revisits and problematises the learning, teaching and research practices of all parties concerned, as well as the power relations between them.

All in all, this is a thoroughly thought-provoking volume. There are many contradictions in the different positions that the different texts take – not just in the voices of the authors, but also in the voices of their students and the shifting perspectives that they embody. In the end, the message of this book is not ‘just do it’, but do it with others, collaboratively and critically, repeatedly, and always with respect for the other. With autonomy now at the official centre of language education (and education) in many countries, we can expect in the coming years to see a proliferation of research into autonomy in second language education. Whether this work becomes entrenched in discourses of justification and the status quo or moves towards a more crit-
ical and political understanding of transformative learning, as heralded by Lamb in his excellent epilogue, remains to be seen, however.

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Lamy and Hampel’s book on online communication joins others on the use of computers in language learning and teaching aimed mainly at an audience of trainee language teachers. It is published in a series that emphasizes the link between research and practice, not least by providing examples and ideas for research projects. Within the field of CALL, the authors put the focus clearly on online communication.

Part 1, on key concepts and issues, takes up roughly the first half of the book and begins by making clear the distinction between CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and CMCL (computer-mediated communication for language learning). The first chapter describes the fluid, unstructured situation today. CALL as a field has had some problems defining its boundaries and subsections (as evidenced by the multitude of acronyms used to describe the field: CALL, ICT4LT, CALI, MALL, etc.) and has now become such a heterogeneous discipline that is makes good sense to restrict this book’s theme to one aspect only. CMCL, in the authors’ sense, therefore does not include what can perhaps be thought of as the traditional core area of CALL, that is, dedicated language learning software. Instead, it looks at the uses of tools such as mobile phones and how these could be used to support language learning.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the theoretical background of CMCL. For the authors, sociocultural theory, with its ideas of ‘situated learning’ and ‘communities of practice’, seems to be the most useful approach. This puts new literacies at the centre of CMCL. Users not only need to be able to deal with the technical aspects of new media, they also need to understand the cultural and social assumptions of the context. Despite the possibility of including icons, speech or video in the modes for communication, CMC (computer-mediated communication) is not equivalent to a face-to-face conversation. Teachers should therefore keep in mind that face-to-face tasks cannot necessarily be transferred without problems to computer-mediated contexts, even if participants master the technology. The affordances of the medium might well differ to such an extent as to make the original task unrecognizable.

In chapter 4 the authors give their readers the first of many pieces of advice for research projects, reiterating the appeal so often made by the CALL community that we should not try to directly compare CMC and face-to-face tasks and try to measure their relative efficiency for language learning. Despite these appeals, administrators and trainee teachers are likely to repeat this question (and rightly so), but this book – like others in the field – does not answer the question. One of the likely reasons for this refusal on the part of CALL researchers to address this question is the fact that we do not have a theory of multimodal computer-mediated discourse, so research in CMCL uses only partially-suited tools such as Discourse Analysis for the analysis of communication involving ICT.