

# Learner Autonomy

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, the concepts of learner *autonomy* and *independence* have gained momentum, the former becoming a ‘buzz-word’ within the context of language learning (Little, 1991: 2). It is a truism that one of the most important spin-offs of more communicatively oriented language learning and teaching has been the premium placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process (see Wenden, 1998: xi). It goes without saying, of course, that this shift of locus of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of a concatenation of changes to the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centred kind of learning. What is more, this reshaping, so to speak, of teacher and learner roles has been conducive to a radical change in the age-old distribution of power and authority that used to plague the traditional classroom. Cast in a new perspective and regarded as having the ‘capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action’ (Little, 1991: 4), learners, *autonomous* learners, that is, are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. However, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant, abdicating his / her control over what is transpiring in the language learning process. In the present study, it will be shown that learner autonomy is a perennial dynamic process amenable to ‘educational interventions’ (Candy, 1991), rather than a static product, a state, which is reached once and for all. Besides, what permeates this study is the belief that ‘in order to help learners to assume greater control over their own learning it is important to help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use’ (Holmes & Ramos, 1991, cited in James & Garrett, 1991: 198). At any rate, individual learners differ in their learning habits, interests, needs, and motivation, and develop varying degrees of independence throughout their lives (Tumposky, 1982).

## 2. What is autonomy?

For a definition of autonomy, we might quote Holec (1981: 3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 1) who describes it as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning’. On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 2):

- a) for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
- b) for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- c) for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
- d) for the exercise of *learners’ responsibility* for their own learning;
- e) for the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

It is noteworthy that autonomy can be thought of in terms of a *departure* from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and the roles of the participants in the learning process. The relevant literature is riddled with innumerable definitions of autonomy and other

synonyms for it, such as ‘independence’ (Sheerin, 1991), ‘language awareness’ (Lier, 1996; James & Garrett, 1991), ‘self-direction’ (Candy, 1991), ‘andragogy’ (Knowles, 1980; 1983a) etc., which testifies to the importance attached to it by scholars. Let us review some of these definitions and try to gain insights into what learner autonomy means and consists of.

As has been intimated so far, the term autonomy has sparked considerable controversy, inasmuch as linguists and educationalists have failed to reach a consensus as to what autonomy really is. For example, in David Little’s terms, learner autonomy is ‘essentially a matter of the learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning...a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action’ (Little, 1991: 4). It is not something done to learners; therefore, it is far from being another teaching method (*ibid.*). In the same vein, Leni Dam (1990, cited in Gathercole, 1990: 16), drawing upon Holec (1983), defines autonomy in terms of the learner’s willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning. More specifically, she, like Holec, holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation.

To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975). As we shall see, this line of reasoning operates within, and is congruent with, the theory of constructivism. For Rathbone (1971: 100, 104, cited in Candy, 1991: 271), the autonomous learner is

a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world.

Within such a conception, learning is not simply a matter of rote memorisation; ‘it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events’ (Candy, 1991: 271).

Such “inventories” of characteristics evinced by the putative autonomous learner abound, and some would say that they amount to nothing more than a romantic ideal which does not square with reality. This stands to reason, for most of the characteristics imputed to the “autonomous learner” encapsulate a wide range of attributes not commonly associated with learners. For instance, Benn (1976, cited in Candy, 1991: 102) likens the autonomous learner to one ‘[w]hose life has a consistency that derives from a coherent set of beliefs, values, and principles...[and who engages in a] still-continuing process of criticism and re-evaluation’, while Rousseau ([1762] 1911, cited in Candy, 1991: 102) regards the autonomous learner as someone who ‘is obedient to a law that he prescribes to himself’. Within the context of education, though, there seem to be seven main attributes characterising autonomous learners (see Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998: 41-42):

- 1) Autonomous learners *have insights into* their learning styles and strategies;
- 2) *take an active approach to the learning task at hand*;
- 3) *are willing to take risks*, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- 4) *are good guessers*;

- 5) *attend to form as well as to content*, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
- 6) *develop the target language into a separate reference system* and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
- 7) *have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language*.

Here, some comments with respect to the preceding list are called for. The points briefly touched upon above are *necessary* but not *sufficient* conditions for the development of learner autonomy, and many more factors such as learner needs, motivation, learning strategies, and language awareness have to be taken into consideration. For example, the first point hinges upon a metalanguage that learners have to master in order to be regarded as autonomous, while points 4) and 7) pertain to learner motivation. In view of this, an attempt will be made, in subsequent sections, to shed some light on some of the parameters affecting, and interfering with, learners' self-image as well as their capacity and will to learn. It is of consequence to note that autonomy is a process, not a product. One does not *become* autonomous; one only *works towards* autonomy. One corollary of viewing autonomy in this way is the belief that there are some things to be *achieved* by the learner, as well as some *ways* of achieving these things, and that autonomy 'is learned at least partly through educational experiences [and interventions]' (Candy, 1991: 115). But prior to sifting through the literature and discussing learning strategies, motivation, and attitudes entertained by learners, it would be pertinent to cast learner autonomy in relation to dominant philosophical approaches to learning. The assumption is that what is dubbed as learner autonomy and the extent to which it is a permissible and viable educational goal are all too often 'based on [and thus constrained by] particular conceptions of the constitution of knowledge itself' (Benson, 1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 20).

### **3. Learner autonomy and dominant philosophies of learning**

In this section, three dominant approaches to knowledge and learning will be briefly discussed, with a view to examining how each of them connects up with learner autonomy. Positivism, which reigned supreme in the twentieth century, is premised upon the assumption that knowledge reflects objective reality. Therefore, if teachers can be said to hold this "objective reality," learning can only 'consist...in the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another' (Benson & Voller, 1997: 20). Congruent with this view, of course, is the maintenance and enhancement of the "traditional classroom," where teachers are the *purveyors* of knowledge and wielders of power, and learners are seen as 'container[s] to be filled with the knowledge held by teachers' (*ibid.*). On the other hand, positivism also lends support to the widespread notion that knowledge is attained by dint of the 'hypothesis-testing' model, and that it is more effectively acquired when 'it is *discovered* rather than *taught*' (*ibid.*) (my italics). It takes little perspicacity to realise that positivism is incongruent with, and even runs counter to, the development of learner autonomy, as the latter refers to a gradual but radical divorce from conventions and restrictions and is inextricably related to self-direction and self-evaluation.

Constructivism is an elusive concept and, within applied linguistics, is strongly associated with Halliday (1979, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 21). As Candy (1991: 254) observes, '[o]ne of the central tenets of constructivism is that individuals try to give meaning to, or construe, the perplexing maelstrom of events and ideas in which they find themselves caught up'. In contrast to positivism, constructivism posits the view that, rather than internalising or discovering objective knowledge (whatever that might mean), individuals reorganise and restructure their experience.

In Candy's terms (Candy, 1991: 270), constructivism 'leads directly to the proposition that knowledge cannot be taught but only learned (that is, constructed)', because knowledge is something 'built up by the learner' (von Glasersfeld & Smock, 1974: xvi, cited in Candy, 1991: 270). By the same token, language learning does not involve internalising sets of rules, structures and forms; each learner brings her own experience and world knowledge to bear on the target language or task at hand. Apparently, constructivism supports, and extends to cover, psychological versions of autonomy that appertain to learners' behaviour, attitudes, motivation, and self-concept (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 23). As a result, constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy.

Finally, critical theory, an approach within the humanities and language studies, shares with constructivism the view that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered or learned. Moreover, it argues that knowledge does not reflect reality, but rather comprises 'competing ideological versions of that reality expressing the interests of different social groups' (Benson & Voller, 1997: 22). Within this approach, learning concerns issues of power and ideology and is seen as a process of interaction with social context, which can bring about social change. What is more, linguistic forms are bound up with the social meanings they convey, in so far as language is power, and vice versa. Certainly, learner autonomy assumes a more social and political character within critical theory. As learners become aware of the social context in which their learning is embedded and the constraints the latter implies, they gradually become independent, dispel myths, disabuse themselves of preconceived ideas, and can be thought of as 'authors of their own worlds' (ibid.: 53).

#### **4. Conditions for learner autonomy**

The concern of the present study has so far been with outlining the general characteristics of autonomy. At this juncture, it should be reiterated that autonomy is not an article of faith, a product ready made for use or merely a personal quality or trait. Rather, it should be clarified that autonomous learning is achieved when certain conditions obtain: cognitive and metacognitive strategies on the part of the learner, motivation, attitudes, and knowledge about language learning, i.e., a kind of metalanguage. To acknowledge, however, that learners have to follow certain *paths* to attain autonomy is tantamount to asserting that there has to be a teacher on whom it will be incumbent to show the way. In other words, autonomous learning is by no means "teacherless learning." As Sheerin (1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63) succinctly puts it, '[t]eachers...have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to *stay afloat*' (my italics).

Probably, giving students a "helping hand" may put paid to learner autonomy, and this is mainly because teachers are ill-prepared or reluctant to 'wean [students]...away from teacher dependence' (Sheerin, 1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63). After all, 'it is not easy for teachers to change their role from purveyor of information to counsellor and manager of learning resources...And it is not easy for teachers to let learners solve problems for themselves' (Little, 1990, cited in Gathercole, 1990: 11). Such a transition from teacher-control to learner-control is fraught with difficulties but it is mainly in relation to the former (no matter how unpalatable this may sound) that the latter finds its expression. At any rate, learner-control—which is ancillary to autonomy—'is not a single, unitary concept, but rather a continuum along which various instructional situations may be placed' (Candy, 1991: 205). It is to these 'instructional situations' that we will turn in the next section. In this section, it is of utmost importance to gain insights into the strategies learners

use in grappling with the object of enquiry, i.e., the target language, as well as their motivation and attitude towards language learning in general. A question germane to the discussion is, what does it mean to be an autonomous learner in a language learning environment?

#### 4.1. Learning strategies

A central research project on learning strategies is the one surveyed in O'Malley and Chamot (1990). According to them, learning strategies are 'the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information' (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 1, cited in Cook, 1993: 113)—a definition in keeping with the one provided in Wenden (1998: 18): '*Learning strategies* are mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so'. To a greater or lesser degree, the strategies and learning styles that someone adopts 'may partly reflect personal preference rather than innate endowment' (Skehan, 1998: 237). We will only briefly discuss some of the main learning strategies, refraining from mentioning communication or compensatory strategies (see Cook, 1993 for more details).

##### 4.1.1. Cognitive strategies

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 44), cognitive strategies 'operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning'. Learners may use any or all of the following cognitive strategies (see Cook, 1993: 114-115):

- a) *repetition*, when imitating others' speech;
- b) *resourcing*, i.e., having recourse to dictionaries and other materials;
- c) *translation*, that is, using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and / or producing the target language;
- d) *note-taking*;
- e) *deduction*, i.e., conscious application of L2 rules;
- f) *contextualisation*, when embedding a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence;
- g) *transfer*, that is, using knowledge acquired in the L1 to remember and understand facts and sequences in the L2;
- h) *inferencing*, when matching an unfamiliar word against available information (a new word etc);
- i) *question for clarification*, when asking the teacher to explain, etc.

There are many more cognitive strategies in the relevant literature. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) recognise 16.

##### 4.1.2. Metacognitive strategies

According to Wenden (1998: 34), 'metacognitive knowledge includes all facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations'. In a sense, metacognitive strategies are skills used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activity; 'they are strategies *about* learning rather than learning strategies themselves' (Cook, 1993: 114). Let us see some of these strategies:

- a) *directed attention*, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task;
- b) *selective attention*, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;
- c) *self-monitoring*, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks;

- d) *self-evaluation*, i.e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards;
- e) *self-reinforcement*, rewarding oneself for success.

At the *planning* stage, also known as *pre-planning* (see Wenden, 1998: 27), learners identify their objectives and determine how they will achieve them. Planning, however, may also go on while a task is being performed. This is called *planning-in-action*. Here, learners may change their objectives and reconsider the ways in which they will go about achieving them. At the *monitoring* stage, language learners act as 'participant observers or overseers of their language learning' (ibid.), asking themselves, "How am I doing? Am I having difficulties with this task?", and so on. Finally, when learners *evaluate*, they do so in terms of the *outcome* of their attempt to use a certain strategy. According to Wenden (1998: 28), evaluating involves three steps: 1) learners examine the outcome of their attempts to learn; 2) they access the criteria they will use to judge it; and 3) they apply it.

#### 4.2. Learner attitudes and motivation

Language learning is not merely a cognitive task. Learners do not only reflect on their learning in terms of the language input to which they are exposed, or the optimal strategies they need in order to achieve the goals they set. Rather, the success of a learning activity is, to some extent, contingent upon learners' stance towards the world and the learning activity in particular, their sense of self, and their desire to learn (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 134-136). As Candy (1991: 295-296) says, 'the *how* and the *what* of learning are intimately interwoven...[T]he overall approach a learner adopts will significantly influence the shape of his or her learning outcomes' (my italics). In other words, language learning—as well as learning, in general—has also an *affective* component. 'Meeting and interiorising the grammar of a foreign language is not simply an intelligent, cognitive act. It is a highly affective one too...' (Rinvolveri, 1984: 5, cited in James & Garrett, 1991: 13). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993: 1, cited in Graham, 1997: 92) define 'affective variables' as the 'emotionally relevant characteristics of the individual that influence how she / he will respond to any situation'. Other scholars, such as Shumann (1978) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) attach less importance to learners' emotions, claiming that 'social and psychological factors' give a more suitable description for students' reactions to the learning process. Amongst the social and affective variables at work, self-esteem and desire to learn are deemed to be the most crucial factors 'in the learner's ability to overcome occasional setbacks or minor mistakes in the process of learning a second [or foreign] language' (Tarone & Yule, 1989: 139). In this light, it is necessary to shed some light on learner attitudes and motivation.

Wenden (1998: 52) defines attitudes as 'learned motivations, valued beliefs, evaluations, what one believes is acceptable, or responses oriented towards approaching or avoiding'. For her, two kinds of attitudes are crucial: attitudes learners hold about their *role* in the learning process, and their *capability* as learners (ibid.: 53). In a sense, attitudes are a form of metacognitive knowledge. At any rate, 'learner beliefs about their role and capability as learners will be shaped and maintained...by other beliefs they hold about themselves as learners' (ibid.: 54). For example, if learners believe that certain personality types cannot learn a foreign language and they believe that they are that type of person, then they will think that they are fighting a "losing battle," as far as learning the foreign language is concerned. Furthermore, if learners labour under the misconception that learning is successful only within the context of the "traditional classroom," where the teacher directs, instructs, and

manages the learning activity, and students must follow in the teacher's footsteps, they are likely to be impervious or resistant to learner-centred strategies aiming at autonomy, and success is likely to be undermined.

In a way, attitudes are 'part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living [or the culture of the target language]' (Brown, 1987: 126), and it seems clear that positive attitudes are conducive to increased motivation, while negative attitudes have the opposite effect. But let us examine the role of motivation.

Although the term 'motivation' is frequently used in educational contexts, there is little agreement among experts as to its exact meaning. What most scholars seem to agree on, though, is that motivation is 'one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second / foreign language (L2) learning. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process' (Dornyei, 1998: 117). According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993: 3), motivation is comprised of three components: 'desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task'.

It is manifest that in language learning, people are motivated in different ways and to different degrees. Some learners like doing grammar and memorising; others want to speak and role-play; others prefer reading and writing, while avoiding speaking. Furthermore, since '[the learning of a foreign language] involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner' (Williams, 1994: 77, cited in Dornyei, 1998: 122), an important distinction should be made between *instrumental* and *integrative* motivation. Learners with an instrumental orientation view the foreign language as a means of finding a good job or pursuing a lucrative career; in other words, the target language acts as a 'monetary incentive' (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 3). On the other hand, learners with an integrative orientation are interested in the culture of the target language; they want to acquaint themselves with the target community and become integral parts of it. Of course, this approach to motivation has certain limitations (see Cookes and Schmidt, 1991, cited in Lier, 1996: 104-105), but an in-depth analysis is not within the purview of this study. The bottom line is that motivation is 'a central mediator in the prediction of language achievement' (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 3), as various studies have shown (see Kraemer, 1990; Machnick and Wolfe, 1982; *et al.*).

### 4.3. Self-esteem

Closely related to attitudes and motivation is the concept of self-esteem, that is, the evaluation the learner makes of herself with regard to the target language or learning in general. '[S]elf-esteem is a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself' (Coopersmith, 1967: 4-5, cited in Brown, 1987: 101-102). If the learner has a 'robust sense of self', to quote Breen and Mann (1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 134), his relationship to himself as a learner is unlikely to be marred by any negative assessments by the teacher. Conversely, a lack of self-esteem is likely to lead to negative attitudes towards his capability as a learner, and to 'a deterioration in cognitive performance', thus confirming his view of himself as incapable of learning (Diener and Dweck, 1978, 1980, cited in Wenden, 1998: 57).

Now that we have examined some of the factors that may enhance, or even militate against, the learner's willingness to take charge of her own learning and her confidence in her ability as a learner, it is of consequence to consider possible ways of

promoting learner autonomy. To say, though, that learner autonomy can be fostered is not to reduce it to a set of skills that need to be acquired. Rather, it is taken to mean that the teacher and the learner can work towards autonomy by creating a friendly atmosphere characterised by ‘low threat, unconditional positive regard, honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others, approval of self-improvement as a goal, collaboration rather than competition’ (Candy, 1991: 337). In the next section, some general guidelines for promoting learner autonomy will be given, on the assumption that the latter does not mean leaving learners to their own devices or learning in isolation.

## **5. How can learner autonomy be promoted?**

To posit ways of fostering learner autonomy is certainly to posit ways of fostering *teacher* autonomy, as ‘[t]eachers’ autonomy permeates into [learners’] autonomy’ (Johnson, Pardesi and Paine, 1990, cited in Gathercole, 1990: 51). Nevertheless, our main focus will be on what the learner can do in order to attain a considerable degree of autonomy, even though the success of the learner is, to a great extent, determined—alas! vitiated—by the educational system and the requisite role of the teacher.

### **5.1. Self-reports**

According to Wenden (1998: 79-95), a good way of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware of their own strategies is to assign a task and have them report what they are thinking *while* they are performing it. This self-report is called *introspective*, as learners are asked to introspect on their learning. In this case, ‘the [introspective] self-report is a verbalization of one’s stream of consciousness’ (Wenden, 1998: 81). Introspective reports are assumed to provide information on the strategies learners are using at the time of the report. However, this method suffers from one limitation: ‘[t]he concentration put on thinking aloud might detract from [learners’] ability to do the task efficiently’ (ibid.: 83), thus rendering the outcome of the report spurious and tentative.

Another type of self-report is what has been dubbed as *retrospective* self-report, since learners are asked to think back or retrospect on their learning. Retrospective self-reports are quite open ended, in that there is no limit put on what students say in response to a question or statement that points to a topic in a general way. There are two kinds of retrospective self-reports: *semi-structured interviews* and *structured questionnaires*. A semi-structured interview may focus on a specific skill with a view to extracting information about learners’ feelings towards particular skills (reading, listening, etc.), problems encountered, techniques resorted to in order to tackle these problems, and learners’ views on optimal strategies or ways of acquiring specific skills or dealing with learning tasks. A structured questionnaire seeks the same information but in a different way: by dint of explicit questions and statements, and then asking learners to *agree* or *disagree*, write *true* or *false*, and so forth.

It could be argued that self-reports can be a means of raising awareness of learners’ strategies and the need for constant evaluation of techniques, goals, and outcomes. As Wenden (1998: 90) observes, ‘without awareness [learners] will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviors and never be fully autonomous’.

### **5.2. Diaries and evaluation sheets**

Perhaps one of the principal goals of education is to alter learners' beliefs about themselves by showing them that their putative failures or shortcomings can be ascribed to a lack of effective strategies rather than to a lack of potential. After all, according to Vygotsky (1978), learning is an internalised form of a formerly social activity, and 'a learner can realize [his] potential interactively—through the guidance of supportive other persons such as parents, teachers, and peers' (Wenden, 1998: 107). Herein lies the role of diaries and evaluation sheets, which offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions. Let us have a look at the following diaries based on authentic student accounts of their language learning:

**A.**

*Dear Diary,*

*These first few days have been terrible. I studied English for eight years...just think, eight years, but I only learned a lot of grammar. I can't speak a word. I don't dare. I can't express myself in the right way, so I am afraid to speak.*

*The other day I started watching TV, so I could get accustomed to the sound. I don't understand TV news very well...only a few words. I can't get the main point. In school it's easy to understand, but I can't understand the people in the stores.*

*What can I do?*

*Yours Truly,*

*Impatient*

(from Wenden, 1998: 102)

**B.**

*Dear Diary,*

*I read the New York Times every day. Every day I learn many new expressions—a lot of vocabulary. But I can't use this vocabulary in conversation. The same thing happens with what I learn at school. I can't use it when I want to talk to Americans or even with my own Spanish friends.*

*I need some help.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Confused*

(from Wenden, 1998: 102)

Alongside diaries, students can also benefit from putting pen to paper and writing on their expectations of a course at the beginning of term, and then filling in evaluation sheets, or reporting on the outcomes of a course, at the end of term. These activities are bound to help learners put things into perspective and manage their learning more effectively. Let us consider two such reports:

**1.**

*What do I want to do this year?*

**"I want to speak more English and I'd like to spell better than I do now. I would like to work with another boy or girl who is willing to speak English with me and make some activities in English. Materials: Challenge to think and crosswords.**

**I would like to get a more varied language and I would like to be better at spelling, especially the words used in**

**everyday situations. How: I will prepare 'two minutes' talk' for every lesson, I will write down new words five times and practise pronouncing them. I will get someone or myself to correct it. I will read at least two books—difficult ones—and make book-reviews."**

(Beginning of term—4<sup>th</sup> year of English  
[from Dam, 1990, cited in Gathercole,  
1990: 30])

2.

*What do you feel you know now that you didn't know before?*

**"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. We try all the time to extend our vocabulary and to get an active language. Evaluation also helped us. It is like going through things again."**

(End of term—4<sup>th</sup> year of English  
[from Dam, 1990, cited in Gathercole,  
1990: 32])

So far, one of the assumptions underlying this discussion on learner autonomy has been that the teacher has not relinquished his "authority"; rather, that he has committed himself to providing the learners with the opportunity to experiment, make hypotheses, and improvise, in their attempt to master the target language and, along with it, to learn how to learn in their own, individual, *holistic* way (see Papaconstantinou, 1997). It may be the case that learner autonomy is best achieved when, among other things, the teacher acts as a *facilitator* of learning, a *counsellor*, and as a *resource* (see Voller, 1997, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997: 99-106). In other words, when she lies somewhere along a continuum between what Barnes (1976, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997: 99) calls *transmission* and *interpretation* teachers. As Wright (1987: 62, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997: 100) notes,

*transmission* teachers believe in subject disciplines and boundaries between them, in content, in standards of performance laid down by these disciplines that can be objectively evaluated...that learners will find it hard to meet the standards; *interpretation* teachers believe that knowledge is the ability to organize thought, interpret and act on facts; that learners are intrinsically interested and naturally inclined to explore their worlds...that learners already know a great deal and have the ability to refashion that knowledge.

The interpretation teacher respects learners' needs and is 'more likely to follow a *fraternal-permissive* model' (emphasis added) (Stevick, 1976: 91-93, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997: 100). It is with this type of teacher that the role of persuasive communication is most congruent.

### **5.3. Persuasive communication as a means of altering learner beliefs and attitudes**

Inasmuch as the success of learning and the extent to which learners tap into their potential resources in order to overcome difficulties and achieve autonomy are determined by such factors as learners' motivation, their desire to learn, and the beliefs they hold about themselves as learners and learning *per se*, it is manifest that changing some negative beliefs and attitudes is bound to facilitate learning. 'Attitude change [is assumed to] be brought about through exposure to a persuasive communication [between the teacher and the learners]' (Wenden, 1998: 126). According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of attitude change developed by Petty and Cacciopo (1986, cited in Wenden, 1998: 126), there are several ways of bringing about this change, however, our concern will only be with persuasive communication.

A persuasive communication is a discussion presenting information and arguments to change a learner's evaluation of a topic, situation, task, and so on. These arguments could be either explicit or implicit, especially when the topic is deemed of importance. If, for instance, a deeply ingrained fear or belief precludes the learner from engaging in the learning process, persuasive communication purports to help bring these facts to light and identify the causes that underlie them. It should be noted, though, that no arguments to influence students' views are given. Rather, the communication comprises facts that show what learners can do to attain autonomy and that learners who do so are successful (see Wenden, 1998: 126). This approach is based on the assumption that when learners are faced with convincing information about a situation, 'they can be led to re-examine existing evaluations they hold about it and revise or change them completely' (*ibid.*: 127).

## **6. Conclusion**

This study is far from comprehensive, as we have only skimmed the surface of the subject and the puzzle called learner autonomy. Many more pieces are missing. For instance, no mention has been made of the role of the curriculum in promoting learner autonomy, despite the debate on the relationship between classroom practice and ideological encoding (Littlejohn, 1997, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997: 181-182). At any rate, the main point of departure for this study has been the notion that there are degrees of learner autonomy and that it is not an absolute concept. It would be nothing short of ludicrous to assert that learners come into the learning situation with the knowledge and skills to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, or to make decisions on content or objectives. Nevertheless, learner autonomy is an ideal, so to speak, that can, and should, be realised, if we want self-sufficient learners and citizens capable of evaluating every single situation they find themselves in and drawing the line at any inconsistencies or shortcomings in institutions and society at large. Certainly, though, autonomous learning is not akin to "unbridled learning." There has to be a teacher who will adapt resources, materials, and methods to the learners' needs and even abandon all this if need be. Learner autonomy consists in becoming aware of, and identifying, one's strategies, needs, and goals as a learner, and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning. But even if learner autonomy is amenable to educational interventions, it should be recognised that it 'takes a long time to develop, and...simply removing the barriers to a person's ability to think and behave in certain ways may not allow him or her to break away from old habits or old ways of thinking' (Candy, 1991: 124). As

Holyoake (1892, vol. 1, p. 4) succinctly put it, '[k]nowledge lies everywhere to hand for those who observe and think'.

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