Book Review: Language Learner Autonomy: Theory, Practice and Research

Muthita Chinpakdee
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
E-mail: fai.chinpakdee@vuw.ac.nz

Language Learner Autonomy: Theory, Practice and Research is a collection of theoretically-driven research findings on learner autonomy, an educational construct defined by Holec (1981, p. 3) as "ability to take charge of one's own learning". Since its introduction to the field of language education in the 1980s, learner autonomy has continually attracted wide interest in the field due to its association with language proficiency and skills in learning management. The concept of the learner taking charge of her learning is, however, inextricably linked with Western ideologies such as democracy, empowerment and liberation. Despite the research interest the topic has received over the years, the extent to which this politically-rooted construct can be applicable across various different learning contexts remains an on-going topic of inquiry. This book directly addresses such issues. By guiding readers through theoretical background and practical illustrations

of how the concept can be effectively translated into pedagogical practices, this compilation of research insights has a strong appeal to both learner autonomy researchers and teaching practitioners in general.

The book is structured in three main parts. The first part contains four chapters describing four key principles framing pedagogical procedures in the autonomous language classroom, i.e. the use of target language, interaction and collaboration, learners' management of their own learning, and evaluation. Chapter one questions the merits of explicit grammar instruction commonly practiced in traditional language classrooms. Little, Dam and Legenhausen argue for authentic and spontaneous target language use as a means to both cultivate skills in autonomous learning and develop target language proficiency. The authors present a study from a Danish classroom in which the target language, English, was not only a learning content but also treated as a tool for learning management. The authors conclude that language proficiency and metacognitive skills in learning management are mutually supportive.

Chapter two deals with the second principle for autonomous learning: interaction and collaboration. This chapter strives to engage readers with the idea that developing autonomous learning skills is as much a collaborative effort as an individual endeavor. Hence, chapter two examines teacher-learner interactions as well as learner collaborations in language learning. Readers are also introduced to practical examples of learner-directed activities which can be used to transform teacher-dominated classrooms into a learning space where ideas are shared and knowledge is collaboratively constructed among learners.

Chapter three addresses the essence of learner autonomy: learners' ability for self-management. The chapter expands on Holec's (1981) concept of learner autonomy which entails a democratic shift from teacher-directed learning to learners' self-directed learning and argues that such process requires acknowledging learners' interests and motivation. The authors' thorough consideration of external constraints such as official

curricula and examinations as well as the discussions of misconceptions surrounding the notion of handing over controls in learning to the learners may prove particularly useful to readers whose classroom culture presents hierarchical differences between teacher and learners. Chapter three also presents guiding principles for encouraging learner control.

Chapter four focuses on evaluation skills. The chapter begins by distinguishing assessment and evaluation and argues that traditional assessment approaches may not be conducive to learner autonomy. Instead of leaving evaluation to the teacher, the authors urge that evaluation be jointly conducted in the target language by teacher and learners. Examples of intuitive and user-friendly self-evaluation and peer-evaluation tools such as learning contracts and logbooks were also presented. Those who are considering alternative measures to promote evaluative reflections in their classes may find these easily replicable evaluation schemes very useful.

Through a practical lens, chapters five and six continue to present research-based evidence from the autonomous language classrooms. Chapter five looks at learner autonomy and target language proficiency development. The chapter presents findings accumulated from a longitudinal research study which compared the acquisition of English grammar, vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge of Danish learners in a mixed-ability autonomous language class and German learners in a regular class. Chapter 6 discusses two case studies of autonomous language classrooms in the context of inclusive education. The first case details learning accounts of a learner with behavioral problems and the second case deals with a dyslexic learner. Encouraging findings from both chapters shed some light on how the autonomous language classroom provides a supporting learning space that not only embraces learners' diverse instructional needs but also turns these challenges into a driving force for learning.

Part three considers learner autonomy in relation to future challenges in language education. Chapter seven discusses linguistic, social and educational challenges as a result of large-

scale immigration. The chapter not only serves as a timely response to the evolving language learning landscape but also offers ideas to create classrooms which deliver integrated and streamlined language learning experiences to learners.

Chapter eight reemphasizes the underlying political influence of learner autonomy and offers suggestions for teacher education programs with an aim of promoting autonomous learning. The chapter revisits Holec's argument for learner autonomy as an empowering educational concept and reminds readers that the act of promoting learner autonomy is essentially the same as the act of pursuing democracy in education. With this understanding in mind, readers are guided through suggested principles for designing teacher education programs to enhance pre-service and in-service teachers' understandings of pedagogical challenges in promoting learner autonomy. The authors also propose the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a framework to amplify success in the autonomous language classrooms. Chapter eight ends by providing a checklist of reflective questions for teachers and program designers to critically evaluate their pedagogical practices.

In conclusion, this book presents a comprehensive collection of the authors' pioneering research, focusing on the pedagogical implications of learner autonomy. Samples of learners' reflective writing, excerpts from classroom dialogues and artifacts from learner-directed project work accompanying each chapter enable readers to easily visualize how an autonomous language classroom operates. However, many studies featured in this book were conducted in the European educational contexts, and may not directly relate to some readers whose instructional arrangements present different kinds of enabling factors and challenges. Considering the global interest learner autonomy has received over the years (Little, 2007), insights from other non-European contexts could offer a more complete view on the topic.

Learner autonomy is a concept which, on the one hand, has garnered strong support as an educational imperative. On the other hand, it has also received some criticism for its elusiveness in terms

of practical applications (Little, 2007). What sets this book apart is its ability to translate learner autonomy into a principled framework for pedagogical practices. Short summaries at the beginning and end of each chapter provide effective transitions of ideas, guiding readers through this complex yet fascinating process of learner development. As a teacher and a researcher with an interest in learner autonomy, I personally find this book relevant and very helpful not only because it provides readers with conceptual understandings of a multi-dimensional construct such as learner autonomy but it also encourages readers to take a reflective stance towards possibilities and constraints in promoting learner autonomy in their own educational settings. Points for reflection and suggested readings at the end of each chapter further prompt readers to continue exploring aspects of learner autonomy that are relevant to their interests. This book can serve as a perfect reference for graduate students, researchers and practitioners in applied linguistics whose interests lie in creating a learning environment that simultaneously nurtures the development of language proficiency and learning skills.

The reviewer

Muthita Chinpakdee is a doctoral student at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her research interests include learner autonomy, learning strategies, and language teaching.

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