

**INTERVIEW: A SPECIAL TALK WITH
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☛ **What does ‘learner autonomy in language learning’ mean to you?**

For me, the phrase “learner autonomy in language learning” refers to a network of researchers and empirical research into the role played by the learner in the language learning process. Traditionally, research into language learning seemed to revolve around what the teacher could “do” to the students to help them learn more quickly or efficiently. The metaphor seemed to be one of the doctor “treating” the sick patient; indeed the term “treatment” occurred frequently in experimental studies involving research into teaching methods or materials which sought to explore the effect on the learner (patient).

However, the research into learner autonomy in language learning which has taken place over the last 15-20 years worldwide--spearheaded initially by the work of Henri Holec and colleagues at the University of Nancy II in France, and continued by researchers such as Leslie Dickinson, David Little, and Edith Esch in the United Kingdom, Leni Dam in Denmark and Anita Wenden in the United States of America--represents a kind of revolution for me. More recently, Hong Kong and Japan have established themselves as new centers of research activity in the field. I see this interest in learner autonomy as revolutionary in that it switches the focus of investigation from the teacher to the learner. Furthermore, it requires the learner to consider playing a

role in deciding how her/his responsibilities as learner might be performed and for what purposes.

This relatively new field of Applied Linguistics research, expertly and succinctly surveyed by Phil Benson in his 2001 book *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning* (Pearson Education), now boasts significant research activity in the fields of curriculum design, learner discourse, learner training, the use of technology, materials design, and teacher education, though this list is far from exhaustive.

❁ **What obstacles do you feel make achieving ‘learner autonomy in language learning’ difficult?**

The obstacles are myriad. Learner beliefs about themselves as learners, about language learning, about the optimal means and outcomes of learning--all these elements can be obstacles to the achievement of learner autonomy. Teachers too can be a major obstacle. Some language teachers reportedly feel threatened by the change in role implicit in a commitment to the promotion of learner autonomy, and believe that their new role undermines their authority. My own view is that a commitment to promoting learner autonomy highlights language teachers’ language LEARNING expertise as much as their PEDAGOGIC knowledge and expertise. This should be an affirming change for non-native speaker teachers of English.

Another major obstacle concerns institutional constraints. These constraints--such as curriculum and timetabling considerations - often drive pedagogic decisions, rather than the wellbeing or needs of learners. Institutions are not always comfortable placing themselves in the vanguard of change; many language teaching institutions in recent years have adopted a business approach to dealing with their students, renaming them “clients” and describing teaching as their “core business.” Placing the learner at the center of the learning process, and allocating them the right to design and select course elements does not sit well for managers who feel more comfortable designing “one size fits all” courses which are “on-sold” to clients who are encouraged

to “consume” minimal amounts of teacher time and spend maximum time working with computers in pre-programmed ways.

Time is an obstacle, too, because many innovations initially, at least, require larger amounts of time on the part of course designers, language advisors, teachers, etc. I could probably go on further, but suffice to say, that there are many obstacles to overcome.

☛ How might change be best facilitated to remove these obstacles?

This is a complex question that would require a great deal of time and space to answer well. For each of the obstacles identified above, I would need to respond separately. But to provide one example, the best way to tackle learner beliefs, is, I believe, to actually talk “up front” to learners about what they believe and the implications of those beliefs. It is crucial to make the learners’ beliefs explicit in some way, along with those of the course designers, teachers, or advisors working with the learners. In this way, it is possible to have an honest debate about the philosophical underpinnings of the learning system in which the learner is engaged. Without it, language learning/teaching can become a cynical exercise in which the learner attempts to second guess the intention of the course designer.

Teacher beliefs must be challenged and debated at the point where initial teacher education takes place. However, this is no easy exercise. Time and time again it has been demonstrated that teachers’ ways of teaching can be at variance with their avowed beliefs. Therefore, it is advisable to validate statements of teacher beliefs and philosophy with observations of their teaching practice. This, in itself, becomes an educational experience if it is conducted in good faith.

As for institution-based obstacles, this is an equally difficult obstacle to tackle. However, we now have some excellent case studies of institutional contexts--such as Leni Dam’s work with young learners in the school system in Denmark and the work of Sarah Toogood and Richard Pemberton at Hong Kong University of

Science and Technology--where structures and values have been challenged and extended through the work of teachers intent on demonstrating the value for learners of incorporating principles of learner autonomy into their learning.

☛ **How might SALC (Self Access Learning Centers) help in achieving learner autonomy in language learning?**

SALCs could be ONE venue in which learners are introduced to ideas about managing their own learning. While some of the most challenging aspects of assuming control for one's own learning decisions actually take place when learning within a classroom context, managed by a teacher, the experience of working independently or with other learners in a SALC, can be a learner's first experience of taking their own decisions. For that reason, the learner's introduction to the system of resources and activities that are available in the SALC is crucial. The learner's first contact with this new venue and new style of learning needs to be underpinned by a simple explanation of the philosophical basis for learner autonomy. In the past, I have toyed with the idea of producing a generalized statement about the purpose and value of learners' assuming control of their learning, and having this statement translated into all the languages of our students. For you in Thailand, working with Thai learners, such a formalized statement is probably not necessary, since you can discuss these ideas in Thai to ensure that the rationale for providing and encouraging out-of-class learning is clearly understood.

Once learners have been introduced to the system available in the SALC, the time they spend there **has the potential** to provide a bridge to their classroom learning, if indeed they are enrolled in a mainstream language program. As such, their SALC work can complement and extend the learning that they do in the larger group. It can also model for them the way that they can continue learning outside of the institution.

☛ Do you see any problems in the way SALCs are set up, run, and utilized that limit their effectiveness in developing learner autonomy in language learning?

This is probably too broad a question to answer in general terms. Each SALC manager will be aware of the difficulties which limit the effectiveness of their offerings. But the obstacles we spoke of before are all potential “candidates” as problems in the running of SALCs. Sometimes we are so keen to set up a functioning system, that the SALC is turned into another version of the classroom, with learners required to sign in, keep records to satisfy the teacher, and provide tangible evidence of having done something such as listening to a tape, reading a book, etc. But this kind of approach can encourage “busy work” where students complete tasks in order to be seen to be working, rather than identifying real learning needs, and going about a “bottom up” analysis of the best way to address those needs.

Sometimes SALC managers can be the SALCs’ worst enemy!

As for problems in the way that SALCs are utilized--this goes back to learners’ understanding of the purpose of the SALC. In one institution where I have worked, many learners used the SALC as a “homework center” that is, simply as a venue for completing tasks assigned in class. Many of these tasks did not require them to use the SALC resources or to structure their learning for themselves. As such, the potential of the center was not being exploited. However, I guess we also need to be careful not to become “SALC Police”--in that, encouraging learners to use the centre and feel at home there, may, in the long run, result in their exploring its resources better and using it for different types of learning. However, I believe that there is a general tendency for learners to make an initial assessment of what the SALC offers, develop a habit of using it in a certain way--e.g. listening to tapes on Mondays, and working on vocabulary worksheets on Thursdays (!)--and seldom moving beyond that to explore further once their needs and interests change.

☛ What role should teachers play in SALCs?

I want to be provocative here, and suggest that teachers shouldn't play any role in SALCs! What I mean by this is that the individual who seeks to work in a SALC supporting learners in their independent learning, needs to leave behind the trappings of TEACHING and assume a new role--that of learning advisor, for want of a better term. This involves a significant shift in values and expectations. In reality, most of us both teach and perform a role in the SALC. But I think this can often be confusing for our students because in class, we are "calling the shots," whereas in the SALC, we expect our learners to make decisions about their learning for themselves. This can only be successful if a sound introduction to ways of learning independently is provided for the students. However, because of the potential confusion of roles, I believe it is often preferable that there be dedicated SALC staff who do not also perform a teaching function.

Others have written about the role of the SALC professional. I believe the key attribute of those who wish to support their learners' learning is the ability to LISTEN. Over the past few years, with my colleague David Crabbe, I have been providing a language learning advisory service at Victoria University of Wellington. When we meet with individual students in our capacity as learning advisors--where the assumption of the new role is facilitated by the fact that we meet only with students of languages we don't teach--we have to learn to listen to what the learners say, and then to problem solve our way through the information they provide in order to identify their difficulty within a wider conceptualization of what language learning involves. It is very easy to jump to conclusions and to assume that a student is saying one thing, when in fact, they are saying another. Therefore, I believe that SALC advisors need, above all, to know how to listen.

Secondly, I believe that those working in SALCs need to be expert language LEARNERS. It is our competence as learners which is of most relevance to learners working in SALCs, not our competence as teachers. Time and time again in our interviews with language learners, we found that we needed to stop thinking

as teachers, and start thinking as learners, reminding ourselves of our experiences learning languages, and attempt to analyze what learners say to us from that perspective. This does not mean that the SALC advisor should impose their own experience on the learner, but it does involve a shift in focus from suggesting what needs to be done to exploring with the learner what they might be able to do.

☛ **What does ‘strategic learning’ mean to you?**

“Strategic learning” is not really a term that I use, but I guess it refers to learning which incorporates the activation of learning strategies. However in one sense, all learning is strategic, in the sense that it involves formulating a plan in order to achieve a stated objective. But I believe we need to be careful about how we talk about and present learning strategies to learners. In my view, there is a tendency in some current applied linguistics research to treat learners like “subjects” and show them how to use certain strategies in such a way that takes no account of their own preferred methods of learning.

I do not believe that it is easy to alter the learning habits of an individual. Therefore, if a teacher wishes to influence the way in which her learners approach a given task, she needs to think very hard about what she is doing and how she is doing it.

It would be arrogant to suggest that the teacher is presenting a better way of completing the task than the learner is currently adopting, and naïve to think that the learner is henceforth going to adopt this new strategy. In fact, we have no way of knowing all the mental processes a learner is activating when they complete a task. We have only their account of these. Rather, I see the value of presenting different aspects of strategic learning to learners as principally being awareness raising. This therefore implies that time needs to be allocated to discussing with learners their experience of adopting the new strategy, and their view of it in comparison with their habitual way of completing the task. The task itself is crucial. Strategies based instruction must be presented in the context of the regular type of task which learners

are required to complete. Without this, learners often miss the point of the exercise.

☛ **How might ‘strategic learning’ be best fostered in a SALC?**

My short answer to this question is that I don’t know, because I am not sure that I understand the question. If by the term “strategic learning” you are referring to a teacher-led intervention, where “good” strategies are presented to learners, then I don’t see that this has any place in a SALC. A SALC should be a “teacher free zone,” in my view. We already control enough of our learners’ time and learning; I think it is appropriate that our learners remain in charge when they are in the SALC. But this is not to say that they are not learning strategically while they are in the SALC.

How can we foster goal-directed (i.e. “strategic”) learning? I think this is a very difficult question to answer because it raises the issue of how much we want to interfere in our learners’ SALC learning. Perhaps we could foster strategic learning--that is, learning which achieves the goals it sets out to--by regularly checking with our learners what they are doing in the SALC, what needs they are working on, which resources they are using to work on those needs, and how successful they feel they are being. But, this is a big intrusion into their private learning time. Furthermore, it can encourage learners to report things which do not correspond with the reality of what they are doing. This is a real conundrum for me. How to support, without taking over? I think each advisor needs to find their own response to this question, tailored to the demands of the context in which they are working. But, in most situations, *encouraging learners to reflect on and talk about their learning* is probably a good way of encouraging them to learn in a way which helps them meet their learning goals.

❖ **What priorities should govern the allocation of SALC funding in your opinion?**

I don't think I can sensibly answer this question in general terms. Each context is different; learners' needs differ in different settings, as do institutional priorities and constraints. But ideally, funding decisions should be taken after a comprehensive needs analysis has been done, and some evaluation of the types of future goals of the learners is mapped onto their current competence. Perhaps the most important voices to listen to in making such decisions are those of our learners.

