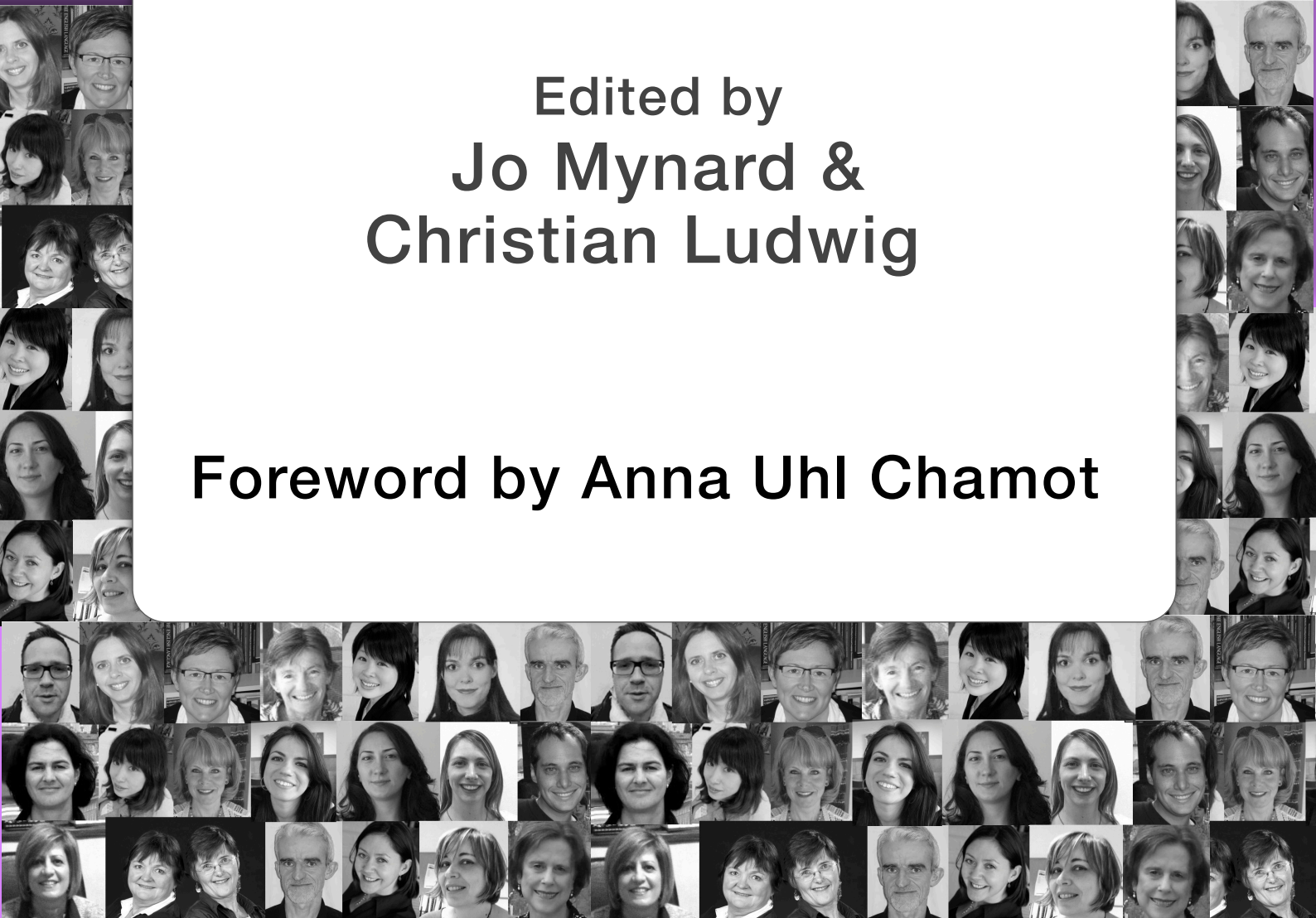


Autonomy in language learning: Tools, tasks and environments

Edited by
Jo Mynard &
Christian Ludwig

Foreword by Anna Uhl Chamot



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**Autonomy in language Learning
Tools, Tasks and Environments**

Jo Mynard and Christian Ludwig (Eds)

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[Foreword and Editors' Introduction](#)

Foreword by Anna Uhl Chamot

Studying the papers in this volume has broadened my understanding of the complex nature of learner autonomy and given me insights into how to help language students move forward on the path towards increasing autonomy. Language educators interested in promoting learner autonomy often make the assumption - as have I - that our students are willing and eager to become more autonomous. This may not always be the case. I well remember observing an English as a second language class where the teacher was valiantly trying to get her students to express their choices among learning activities and to explain the thinking involved in making their choice. The fifteen-year-old students looked at her in puzzled silence for a moment, then one brave girl implored, "Miss, *please* don't make us think! We don't want to choose. Just tell us what to do and we will do it."

The authors of the papers in this volume all advocate a "small steps" approach to developing language learner autonomy. Rather than asking students to suddenly begin to make choices for independent learning, scaffolding is identified that both provides students with tools to assume more autonomy in their learning and compelling reasons for doing so.

The "small steps" are components that can be introduced separately and that together will help students move forward towards increasing autonomy. Many of the papers describe research conducted to understand the effects of one or more steps towards autonomy on learners' perceptions of its efficacy. The types of steps involved to help learners on their individual pathways towards autonomy include: materials for self-study, curricular and program innovations, and new uses of technology. These categories are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Self-study materials could be delivered via computer or teacher - or both, as could the teacher's explicit instruction. And changes in curriculum could generate new materials, uses of technology, and instructional techniques. However, I think it is useful to look at these thoughtful papers through each of these three lenses: materials, curriculum, and technology.

I am defining materials as artifacts designed for students' use that are meant to facilitate their language learning and/or to develop their ability to assume increasing responsibility for their own learning. Examples would be course books, and supplementary materials such as self-access modules. Curriculum, on the other hand, is the course of study or syllabus that includes learning objectives and a scope and sequence of the topics and skills to be included in the course. In some cases, of course, the course book becomes the curriculum. Although technology-assisted instruction can consist of materials or even an entire curriculum, I have identified it as a separate component because of its unique capability to engage learners in truly independent learning - at their own pace, in their own place, and during their own time.

The skillful teacher can motivate, explain, model, provide practice opportunities, and help students evaluate their own learning. Instruction involves materials, curriculum, and

often technology, but the teacher's ability to orchestrate these components in the service of assisting students to become more autonomous learners is, to my mind, the essence of instruction.

Dofs and Hobbs' paper evaluates the self-study materials designed for a university's self-access center (SAC), finding that these materials assisted in bridging the gap between the classroom and SAC and also helped students in their planning, self-awareness, and improvement of language skills. Similarly, Clarke analyzes the learning journals written by 14- and 15-year-old Japanese students of English to determine their rate of progress in becoming autonomous learners. Lacey's paper describes how student logbooks promote differentiation of instruction and learning as well as motivation in the foreign language classroom. Werner's instruction includes a speaking journal assignment in which individual students record a conversation in the target language and then listen to it, evaluate their own speaking, and formulate a plan for improvement. Finally, Gkonou and Rocha describe the development of a course book on academic speaking containing a series of scaffolded activities to promote autonomy.

Five papers in this volume examine the role of the curriculum or program of study in enhancing learner autonomy. De Santo, Rasulo, and De Meo conducted research designed to better understand student perceptions on autonomy so that autonomy objectives and activities of the self-access center could be aligned with the language classrooms. Hasegawa and Thornton conducted an evaluation of a self-directed learning module, finding that focus groups generated more useful suggestions than the initial survey. In Yamaguchi's research, students in a learning how to learn course wrote reflections about how the course impacted their progress towards autonomy. Schuster also had students (as well as teachers) evaluate the effectiveness of using personal learning plans (known also as learning contracts) to tailor the curriculum to their own learning needs while still meeting the course requirements. Course integrated action research into an English language teacher education course, finding that this focus not only increased motivation but also helped teacher candidates increase their autonomy in professional development.

The use of technology in developing learner autonomy is central to three of the papers in this volume. Dal-Bianco provides valuable descriptions and advice to language teachers on using eleven different technologies in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) university blended learning courses. The paper by Eisenmann and Ludwig also address ways to use specific technology tools (webquests, blogs, podcasts, wikis, e-portfolios, and Twitter), to increase learner autonomy, citing not only the benefits of using technology for practicing learner autonomy, but also possible pitfalls that should be considered. Allen explores the use of technology to improve the reading skills, motivation, and self-worth of students in a remedial English course.

This book illustrates a rich variety of ways to enhance learners' development of autonomy through the introduction of innovative "small steps" in the language classroom. If only the teacher that I observed whose students "didn't want to think" had read this book, she would have found examples of materials, courses, and activities that would have led her students gradually towards assuming greater responsibility for their own learning.

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[Introduction: Tools, Tasks and Environments for Learner Autonomy](#)

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Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy has gained prominence in the field of foreign language education, and is now part and parcel of current language teaching frameworks and curricula worldwide. This *prima facie* may create the impression that we all understand the term autonomy in the same way. However, autonomy is by no means uniformly defined within and across cultures, disciplines and educational institutions as for each individual it may mean something completely different (Everhard, 2013; Reinders & White, 2011). The aim of this general introduction is not to present a comprehensive definition of autonomy, but to raise awareness of the different dimensions one should bear in mind.

First of all, autonomy is not a recent insight, or as Little (1995, p. 175) has it:

Although much that has been written on the subject in recent years might seem to indicate the contrary, there is nothing new or mysterious about learner autonomy. In formal education contexts, genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous. Thus our enterprise is not to promote new kinds of learning, but by pursuing learner autonomy as an explicit goal to help more learners to succeed.

Learner autonomy has already gained prominence in the course of the progressive educational movements of Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi as well as many other democratic education movements such as those of Freire and Illich.

Secondly, there are different dimensions of autonomy. To mention but a few, there is the political dimension which argues that autonomy in language learning should aim to support students in becoming responsible and active members of democratic societies. Others consider autonomy as a capacity which enables learners to take responsibility for their decisions regarding the learning processes and the outcomes of these processes (Little, 1991). Furthermore, autonomy can refer to self-directed learning in which the implied focus on self-study requires learners to have a set of skills to plan their learning, fulfil (self)-set tasks and evaluate the outcomes of their learning in order to proceed to the next planning and learning phase.

No matter which of the mentioned dimensions of autonomy one considers to be the ultimate or most important one, it is time to banish the notion that autonomy is something teachers, instructors or advisors can *do to* their students. Nevertheless, autonomy requires teachers to cede power:

Students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is both because all learning can in any case only be carried out by the students and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education... 'Taking responsibility' involves learners in taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on

learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating progress (Littlewood, 1999, p. 71).

This view also emphasises the fact that autonomous learning (or learning for autonomy) is not a unique enterprise, but an ongoing process which requires instructors and students to constantly evaluate and critically scrutinise their teaching and learning. Thus, enhancing learner autonomy is a matter of collaboration. Collaborative learning, taking place in a 'hypernet' of different spaces, can only be successfully achieved if each individual agent is aware of the opportunities for collaboration.

Tools, Tasks and Environments

This volume is situated within a sociocultural view of learning. Within this theoretical viewpoint, learning happens due to interaction with the world and the people in it through the application of a number of principles. One of these principles is mediation which has been defined as the ways in which people change elements of the world around them using what are known as "psychological tools" (Kozulin, 1998; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008). Psychological tools include cultural artefacts, language, signs, symbols and anything else which can facilitate interaction resulting in reflection followed by some kind of mental change. This notion of mediation is central to the theme of the volume "tools, tasks and environments" and is the concept which binds the three elements together.

Wertsch (2007) interprets Vygotsky's distinction between *explicit* and *implicit mediation* as follows. *Explicit mediation* is likely to be an intentional intervention on the part of the teacher/advisor which influences students' behaviour or thought processes in some way. In practical terms, this might be ways in which experienced teachers or learning advisors make use of advising skills in order to encourage learners to think more deeply and increase their understanding of the process (Carson & Mynard, 2012). *Implicit mediation* according to Wertsch (2007) may be a more subtle way for higher thought processes to surface or for shifts in understandings to occur unconsciously over time due to regular dialogue about learning (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008).

In order to facilitate the promotion of learner autonomy and prepare for the challenges of lifelong learning, educators and learners need to draw upon a range of interconnected tools and tasks that mediate the learning experience. Engaging with these tools and tasks enables learners to take part in the decision-making process and to develop language (learning) awareness. Examples of tools include the use of language itself, artefacts such as authentic materials, (self-) evaluation tools, and tools such as logbooks or portfolios which enable learners and educators to document learning. Tools such as these encourage educators and learners to continuously reflect on the process and to make adaptations which are suitable to the many different environments in which learning takes place. These tools, in combination with appropriate tasks, can facilitate interaction with others and enrich the learning experience. Furthermore, the integration of technological (educational) tools can encourage learners of foreign languages to actively contribute to the learning process by using tools that they already know from everyday life (yet may lack experience with for language learning purposes).

The environments for learning are no longer and by no means restricted to the traditional

language classroom but include all manner of informal and formal learning environments incorporating regional and cultural influences. Recent advances in technology have extended the range of opportunities to bring together learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom and encouraged learners and teachers to include a large variety of previously unexplored environments for language learning.

The Purpose of this Volume

This volume represents the sixth e-book in the *Autonomy in Language Learning* series and aims to showcase tools, tasks and environments for supporting learners in developing autonomy in the context of foreign language learning.

No matter how, where, and for what purposes foreign languages are learned, the process of language learning is assumed to contain certain elements to be effective. However, it is also bound to the cultural context in which it takes place (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). The understanding of culture on which the chapters in this book are based, encompasses different types of culture. Within the context of national cultures which hold different views of how students should learn new languages successfully, distinct institutional cultures can be found which both request and provide different forms and degrees of autonomy. Within this 'cultural diversity', small groups of individuals, either from the same culture or from different cultures, try to make learning successful.

The present collection brings together research and descriptions of successful practice from different educational and cultural backgrounds which will hopefully stimulate researchers, practitioners and students to maximise existing learning opportunities as well as create new ones.

About the Chapters in the Book

The book explores tools, tasks and environments in the context of and for developing learner autonomy in different educational and cultural contexts. The chapters have been organized into five parts to enable us to link similar themes.

Part 1: Self-Access Learning

The book begins with two chapters focusing on self-access learning in different parts of the world. First, **Kerstin Dofs** and **Moira Hobbs'** chapter investigates the questions of (1) whether Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) Study Guides helped learners to increase their language learning awareness, and (2) how in-and out of class learning can successfully complement each other in institutions in New Zealand. The second chapter by **Maria De Santo**, **Margaret Rasulo** and **Anna De Meo** investigates self-access learning in an Italian context. The ongoing project aims to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning by making use of the materials support provided by the Self-Access Centre (SAC). It is argued that there needs to be a close relationship between in-classroom learning and the support provided by the SAC.

Part 2: Self-Directed Learning

The three chapters in this part of the book focus on self-directed learning. The article by

Yuki Hasegawa and **Katherine Thornton** focusses on students' perceptions of a self-directed learning module offered for freshman students at a university in Japan. The overall aim of the study was to investigate whether the module meets the students' needs and that the skills acquired during the course are helpful for students.

Robert Werner's qualitative study investigates learner development through speaking tasks with English majors at a Japanese University. By analysing the students' improvement plans, goals, and means of achieving these goals, the author was able to gain a greater understanding of the decisions that students made in order to improve their speaking skills.

The chapter by **Atsumi Yamaguchi** examines university freshman students' development of learner autonomy through an eight-week self-directed learning course. The author explores evidence of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective awareness as well as students' willingness to take charge of their learning.

Part 3: Technology Tools

Three chapters in this part of the book provide insights into the use of technological tools for developing learner autonomy. These tools include more traditional tools as well as tools not necessarily related to language learning. In her chapter, **Veronica Dal-Bianco** presents a description of tools and tasks for teachers and learners and discusses how they can be integrated into existing and newly-designed blended learning scenarios.

Similarly, the subsequent article by **Maria Eisenmann** and **Christian Ludwig** discusses some of the key relationships between learner autonomy and the use of education technology tools such as webquests and weblogs which can be used in all educational contexts from primary school to higher education.

Finally, **Vicky Allen** describes the Intensive English Program (IEP) at Fujairah Women's College, United Arab Emirates, which supports students in becoming more successful language learners by embracing students' differences through personalized instruction.

Part 4: Learning Plans and Logbooks

There are two chapters in Part 4 that investigate some of the benefits of documenting learning through plans or logbooks. The first chapter by **Frank Lacey** explores the role of logbooks within an autonomous secondary school classroom in Denmark. The author suggests that the student logbook is essential for achieving differentiation, motivation and foreign language communication.

Susann Schuster examines the use of learning plans within schools in Australia as a way to differentiate individual learning capabilities, preferred learning materials, learning contents, and learning objectives. The author examines how plans can support students in taking responsibility for their learning.

Part 5: Within and Beyond the Classroom

The final part contains three chapters related to how educators are promoting autonomy inside the classroom which has benefits for students outside the classroom. **Christina**

Gkonou and **Cynthia Rocha** report on the development of an intensive course in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learning context in Greece. Their chapter addresses aspects such as material and activity design and discusses the success of the students in becoming more self-confident and autonomous in using English in academic contexts.

The contribution by **Simla Course** reports the findings of an ongoing action research study conducted with undergraduate students at a Turkish university. The students were asked to conduct action research projects and present their results in class in order to increase their motivation to complete the course. The results of the study suggest that self and peer evaluation played an important role in the learning process and in increasing the students' agency.

The final chapter by **Donna Clarke** investigates the development of learner autonomy through the promotion of an autonomy-supportive pedagogy with students at the Japanese School of Brussels, Belgium. In order to approach this topic, the entries in the students' learning journals were analysed.

Conclusions

This co-edited volume only shows a snapshot of possible tools and tasks in diverse learning environments both inside and outside of classrooms, self-access centres or other spaces in which successful learning takes place. If you manage to read through the whole volume, and we hope you do, you will notice that although the contexts are diverse, there are many commonalities.

Firstly, autonomous learning is not a specific outcome, but an *ongoing process* which requires instructors and students to constantly evaluate and critically reflect on their teaching and learning in order to be successful.

Secondly, learner autonomy is a matter of *collaboration*. In all of the chapters, the working together of teachers, advisors and students is vital to the development of learner autonomy. However, collaboration also occurs in different learning environments. Even within one institution, there are different spaces, e.g. the classroom and the SALC, yet both of these spaces promote collaboration. This learning can only be successful if each individual agent is aware of the opportunities for collaboration. However, these learning spaces can also be of a virtual nature and the chapters on educational technology tools show how much potential these spaces hold if students are helped to use them wisely.

Thirdly, the chapters elucidate that *awareness* is an integral element of learner autonomy and that there are different ways of helping students to become aware of their learning and of setting and reaching their goals. However, raising awareness is also a constant endeavour and thus reflective processes need to be an integral part of everyday learning for each individual and stakeholder in the process.

We trust that this volume will contribute to your awareness of the practicalities of promoting learner autonomy. We encourage you to find and try out some new tools and tasks and environments.

Jo Mynard (Chiba, Japan) and Christian Ludwig (Koblenz, Germany) 2014

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