Kris Van de Poel Christian Ludwig[1]
University of Antwep/University of Wrzburg, Belgium & Germany

RETHINKING LEARNER AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION AS AGENCY

Abstract

Foreign language learner autonomy has become a widespread concept within the field of education. There are, however, certain constraints when implementing learner autonomy in practice. The present article tackles exactly this issue by taking a closer look at the nexus between foreign language learner autonomy and academic acculturation. Closely related to this, the idea of empowering language learners will also be discussed, mainly arguing that developing learner autonomy can only work if (foreign language) learners are successfully acculturated into their academic community. Although this paper is of a more theoretical nature, the article is informed by recent empirical findings by one of the authors.

Key words: autonomy, academic accylturation, empowerment.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is one of the buzz concepts in contemporary foreign language learning research. In daily classroom practice many teachers are convinced that incorporating principles of learner autonomy can have a positive impact on learning. Yet, in addition to the multiple philosophical, pedagogical and practical reasons for incorporating learner autonomy (cf. Cotterall, 1995), many definitions have been associated with the term since it was first coined in the context of foreign language learning by Henri Holec in 1979 (cited here as Holec, 1981). This is not least due to the fact that autonomy relies on a number of foundational sources or, in Benson's words (2011), dimensions like political philosophy (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean Paul Sartre), developmental psychology (Lev Vygotzky), and educational reform movements (John Dewey, Paolo Freire, & Ivan Illich). In addition to this, autonomy can "take numerous different forms, depending on their [the learners'] age, how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be, and so on" (Little, 1991, p. 4). Little's quote suggests that the development of learner autonomy has to be looked at within the particular context in which it takes place and which in this case is academic acculturation.

The concept of acculturation has traditionally been connected to the integration of (foreign exchange) students and staff acculturated into the academic practice of a culture different from their own. Yet, acculturation is anything but restricted to an intercultural (or interlanguage) experience, since it also alludes to the transition from one school type to another or from secondary school to university which "is not just a change of physical environment, but [...] also a change of culture" (Gasiorek & Van de Poel, 2012, p. 58). Concerning the latter, students have to acculturate into a community with established rituals which requires them to "interact with their community through the reigning

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[1] **Email**: christian.ludwig@ph-karlsruhe.de

academic discourse, i.e., they must learn this community's communicative currency: the norms, standards, procedures and linguistic forms that constitute academic discourse" (Gasiorek & Van de Poel, 2012, p. 58). However, (academic) acculturation is not a one-way, but a deeply reciprocal process as the acculturated not completely loses the experiences and expertise from his old life, but most likely also exerts influence on the host group he has become a part of (Berry, 2002).

The aim of this article is to have a closer look at the nexus between learner autonomy and academic acculturation. We assume that language learning in higher education goes beyond 'filling' learners with linguistic knowledge and that universities create an educational environment which functions as a political and psychological tool for learner empowerment and, in addition to this, intends to equip learners with the necessary skills and competences to become aware of and actively pursue the path of life-long (foreign language) learning. Using the term 'empowerment' in an article on learner autonomy at first glance appears to be problematic as both are often being used as synonymous and share common aims, but do not exactly mean the same. Yet, in the context of academic acculturation, understanding empowerment as "the process of helping learners become aware that they can have an impact on their environment, and can exert some control over their circumstances" (Shrader, 2003) is exactly what we mean when talking about learner autonomy in higher education and language learning. By pinpointing selected areas of learner autonomy and embedding them in the process of acculturation we will show that learners can only develop into pro-active agents of their own learning and learning environment if successfully acculturated into the community within which they are expected to develop and (ideally) act their autonomy as lifelong members of this particular community, e.g. as part of an alumni network. Even though we will maintain a strong perspective on the learner, the teacher will also have to be incorporated into the discussion, for which we rely on empirical data showing that students mainly blame their faculties for not communicating their expectations clearly enough.

2. Learner Autonomy – Exploring the Concept

In a similar vein, Houser and Frymier (2009, p. 36) define an empowered learner as someone who is "motivated to perform tasks, and more specifically an empowered person finds the tasks meaningful, feels competent to perform them, and feels his/her efforts have an impact on the scheme of things". Houser and Frymier (2009, p. 36) suggest distinguishing between 'empowered' and 'empowering'. While they view 'being empowered' as an internal condition, they refer to 'empowering' as an external condition which allows learners to gradually experience the feeling of becoming and being 'empowered'. In current foreign language theory and practice, an abundance of understandings of and approaches to learner autonomy can be found. This requires us to rethink the idea (still promoted as utopian) of one unique all-encompassing definition of autonomy which can be applied to the diverse contexts in which foreign language learning takes place today (c.f. Everhard, 2004). In answer to this, at first glance, problematic reality, Oxford (2008, p. 49) suggests to abandon the notion of 'one autonomy' to the benefit of multiple autonomies. In the following, we will review some of the conceptualisations of autonomy and propose an

understanding of multiple tailored autonomies in a true constructivist or learner-centred tradition.

One of the earliest and most prominent definitions of the term is the one provided by Henri Holec (1981, p. 3) for the Council of Europe, which construes autonomy as:

[...] the ability to take charge of one's own learning, to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of the learning which means [...]:

- Determining the objectives;
- Defining the contents and progressions;
- Selecting methods and techniques to be used;
- Monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
- Evaluating what has been acquired.

Holec's (1988) apprehension emphasises the managerial aspect of autonomy understood as a learner's ability to organise ('manage') his own learning. This ability is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way" (ibid.). Building on this, Little understands autonomy not simply as an ability, but also as a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process (engagement) and content of learning. Thus, he underlines the cognitive side (capacity) of autonomy which Holec was not completely unaware of, but simply did not consider central to his understanding of the concept. Little (1991, p.4) states:

> Essentially, autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts.

A few years after his 1981 definition, Holec (1988, p. 8) defines 'capacity' in the following way: "just as the ability to drive a motor vehicle does not necessarily mean that whenever one gets into a car one is obliged to take the wheel, similarly the autonomous learner is not automatically obliged to self-direct his learning either totally or even partially. The learner will make use of his ability to do this only if he so wishes and if he is permitted to do so by the material, social and psychological constraints to which he is subjected." Benson holds that Holec's (management) and Little's (capacity) understandings of autonomy "underplayed a third dimension concerned with control over the content of learning" (Benson, 2013, pp. 60-61). One example of Benson's notion of control is Dam's classroom model of autonomy which she describes as a "learner-directed learning environment with a focus on learning [...]" (2008, p. 14) in which learners and teachers plan, evaluate and undertake new plannings in a constant process of negotiation and dialogue. Dam's model deriving from

many years of classroom work in Danish comprehensive schools, makes clear that developing autonomy is inherently social ad involves learners and teachers to enter a constant process of negotiation over short- and long-term goals, content and materials (see Benson, 2013, . 60). No matter whether we believe that learners are born as autonomous individuals whose capacity to act autonomously is regressed and whose agency is developed as a product of instruction or that learners are already autonomous and education has to co-create together "with students optimal conditions for the exercise of their autonomy" (Smith, 2003, pp. 130-132), the key challenges connected to developing learner autonomy such as critical educational authorities, curricular constraints and teachers hesitant to hand over control as much as learners unwilling to accept it, remain the same.

3. Academic Acculturation

Learners, and language learners in particular, are in an almost constant transit between phases and stages of learning during which they engage in a process of adjusting to a new (learning) environment, its culture, its customs and its behaviours (Skinner, 2002). Adjusting to new communities and environments on a sociological, psychological, or even language level, can be unsettling and distressing for groups of individuals (Berry, 1997). In the context of education, the transition between secondary and tertiary education exemplifies this process of adjustment and is referred to as academic acculturation (Gee, 1996; Ivanic, 2006; Purves, 1986; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). Instances of academic acculturation as a socio-psychological process have been studied by, among others, Cheng and Fox (2008) and Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012) who state that learners entering higher education 'struggle' to adjust to the new educational and social environment or more specifically, to the new academic demands and expectations. In order to successfully grow in their studies and professional lives, learners have to become comfortable with the discourse, as well as goals and objectives of the new academic context (cf. Hayes, 2004; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). In order to academically acculturate, learners have to become academically literate (Hyland, 2009: p. ix) which means that they have to acquire "the competence and range of skills [needed] not only to read and write texts, but also to understand, interact, and communicate with members of their academic community" (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012, p.296). However, students entering higher education do not find this plain sailing or self-evident and it is increasingly acknowledged that they should be encouraged and guided in their acculturation process.

Thus, if learners are to successfully participate in their learning and grow as individuals with a healthy sense of self and self-direction, they have to adapt or accommodate to their communicative environment (Hyland, 2006) or, in other words, become socialized into the academic practices of their disciplines (Hyland, 2009, p.5), which entails that they will have to deliberately manage their learning, so they become adequately empowered to also engage in it. Despite a growing interest in the field, still little is known about what makes acculturation successful, or which variables influence the process of accommodation to encourage academic acculturation.

4. Engaging with a Community of Practice

Learning is not an 'autistic venture' as interaction and learning from one another are basic human conditions (cf. Little, 1991). Thus, developing autonomy does not require learners to deprive themselves from contact with other groups and individuals but, quite in contrast, becoming autonomous depends on social interaction (cf. Dam, 1990; Little, 2009). In short, learning entails establishing common goals and collectively finding ways to achieve these goals, including the overall aim of becoming more autonomous. In order to make this possible, teachers are stipulated to create and maintain a learning environment which facilitates/enables autonomy and encourages learners to be open and willing to enter a community of practice. Such a community can be defined as a group who shares a genuine interest in a topic and has a need to jointly multiply their group and individual knowledge in a subject area of common interest for situations in real life by exchanging texts. Since meaning is construed in interaction, the members of the community will make choices depending on the purpose(s), channel, code, wider context(s) and audience of their message. Once again, this process does not occur in a vacuum and choices will be influenced by the interactants' experiences and expectations (cf. Hyland, 2009).

Yet, for learners entering a new community of practice and becoming members of a (future) expert group on their subject area can be incredibly challenging as all of them have experienced different degrees of autonomy, might have different (cultural) interpretations of learner autonomy and differ in the degree to which they are able to act autonomously. Furthermore, the notion of autonomy of their institution (the community of practice in the widest sense) might also radically differ from what learners and teachers consider autonomy. Thus, learners need to be empowered to actively shape the community and 'put their own stamp' on it in order to conceive it as authentic and vital to their own learning and success.

5. Curriculum and Syllabus Design

Discussions on the topic often exclusively concentrate on the theoretical foundations of learner autonomy and the role of affective variables such as attitudes and beliefs (Cotterall, 1999) ignoring that successfully developing autonomy also needs to be embedded in (innovative) syllabus and curriculum design. In the following we will argue that when the curriculum and syllabus are systematically designed (following Brown, 1995), they will support the learners en route to becoming more autonomous because the design process reflects and closely follows the process of autonomy (see Holec's 1981 definition above). Today, the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) can be considered one of the most vital documents in foreign language education, as, apart from setting minimum foreign language requirements, it is also widely used in curriculum planning. According to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p.174), a curriculum is defined as "the path travelled by a learner through a sequence of educational experiences, whether under the control of an institution or not". If we understand the CEFR as a guide towards life-long learning "then a curriculum does not end with leaving school [or university], but continues in

some way or other thereafter in a process of life-long learning" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.174). This broader notion of curriculum as a life-long path of learning requires us to rethink our perception of curricula as collections of pre-defined learning goals.

For initial full-time education, the impression of separate units of education and learning is neither possible nor desirable. One might expect that with entering university the idea of life-long learning takes on more prominence while fixed curricula and syllabi create a contrary impression. In other words, university education should give students (and teachers) space to take an active role in designing their curricula and syllabi. While the fact that curricular guidelines in higher education prima facie may appear non-modifiable, the same argument does not hold true for course and syllabus design even within the constraints of subject or departmental curriculum demands. In order to achieve this, Trim (1978, p.1) suggests to make the process of language learning more democratic by providing the conceptual tools for the planning, construction and conduct of courses closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of the learner and enabling him so far as possible to steer and control his own progress.

By doing so, students and teachers refrain from achieving curricular goals which are superimposed and not the learners' own. Thus, they can enter a process of deeper and more authentic learning which, at the same time, turns the aforementioned community of practice into a community which not simply seeks to achieve the pre-determined goals of the syllabus, but sets these goals and then collaboratively finds ways to realise them. Yet, collaborative curriculum and syllabus design should not be limited to specific language goals or skills, but also integrate and thus offer space for acculturation. By doing so, students will become responsible citizens who are "capable of responding rapidly and effectively to environmental changes of all kinds" (Trim, 1978, p.226), changes similar to the ones they encountered when entering university.

In summary, we can say that there should be space within curriculum and syllabus design for learners to gradually become proactive autonomous learners who regulate not only the activity but also the direction of the activity (Littlewood, 1999). Yet, when creating these spaces we also need to bear in mind that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to learner autonomy (Smith, 2003, p. 256). As learners are different in their opinions and beliefs about the process of learning and their ability to manage the process, they also differ in their readiness for, and interpretations of, learner autonomy. In this context, "language can be one of the most powerful tools for initiating and guiding change" (Shrader, 2003, n.p.) and for integrating those personal experiences which are important for learners. Thus, teachers should value what learners have to say and give them the opportunity to communicate about it at an appropriate (language) and managerial level which will ensure the implementation of their needs. By sharing the responsibility to find the right topics, content and learning routes and routines, teachers become instructors and managers who encourage their learners to see the relevance and importance of learning tasks.

6. Learner/Teacher Role

A perception of curricula and syllabi not as constraints but as part of open autonomous learning environments embedded in institutionalised and formal contexts should ideally leave room for learners to create spaces for learning in which

[a]ims and learning targets, course content, learning tasks, and the assessment of learner achievement must all be negotiated; and the basis of this negotiation must be recognition that in the pedagogical process, teachers as well as students can learn, and students as well as learners can teach (Little, 1995, p. 180).

Despite the increasing appreciation of the interrelationship between developing learner autonomy and the required changes on the side of teacher (cf. Reinders & Balçikanli, 2011, p.15), learner autonomy is still often misinterpreted as a teacher-directed method or exclusively seen from the perspective of the learner (cf. Merten & Ritter, 2012, p.93ff; Smith, Barkhuizen &Vieira, 2013) as the responsibility of the learner. Yet, quite in contrast, developing autonomy is a gradual process in which both teacher and learner are involved and which must move at a pace that both can manage (Camilleri, 1997).

Models of teacher autonomy are as ambiguous as models of learner autonomy and reach from understandings that emphasise a teacher's right to "freedom from control" (Benson, 2000) to models which highlight the role of the teacher as a learning-manager in classroom-related decisions (cf. Aoki, 1999). What many models have in common is that autonomous settings require teachers not simply to support learners in finding solutions to more specific set tasks but to scaffold their learning. There is also broad consensus that teachers need to accept knowledge gaps not only on the part of the learners but also on the part of themselves as the classroom environment is designed in such a way that it offers meaningful and available options which are co-determined by teacher and learners. This can only be successful if teachers and learners accept that everyone in the classroom has to be open and at the same time responsible for peer support (cf. Benson, 2013). Entering a new community always requires new members to figure out their position within its social hierarchy. This process of finding your place within a new –established– community is further complicated because the strongly hierarchical structures in higher education (most likely) radically differ from the structures learners are used to from secondary education.

The atmosphere of the autonomous classroom requires teachers and learners to enter into a process of constant negotiations. The question remains in which 'language' –in its 'real' and metaphorical sense– these negotiations are conducted. Researchers in the field seem to agree that the target language plays a vital role in all parts of the learning process and that it is imperative in "developing agency in sociocultural settings" (Toohey & Norton, 2003). In an evaluation of Dam's classroom model, Little, for example, states that "the target language in its metacognitive as well as its communicative function was the channel through which the learners' agency was required to flow" (Little, 2013, n.p.). Therefore, in the next section we will discuss the role of the target language in developing learner autonomy.

7. The Role of the 'Target' Language

Second language acquisition research emphasises the relevance of the target language as an authentic medium in the foreign language classroom. As far as learner autonomy is concerned, language use in general is shaped by the increasing achievement of ownership by the students which results in a learning situation in which the "[t]eacher no longer knows all the answers, meaning that communication in the FL classroom becomes authentic and the language becomes the means, as well as the goal" (Lacey, 2014, n.p.). In a similar vein, Dam, Little & Timmer (1998) view the autonomous classroom as a community of teachers and learners in which the target language is one of the principal tools by which the collaborative process is shaped. Building on this, we suggest that the community is not only shaped by target language use but also strengthens it and presents one of the foundational objectives that learners and teachers pursue together and which is never questioned. This however means that the scope of learner autonomy is to a certain extent constrained by what the learner can do in the target language or domain of the target language under consideration, i.e. the language of the community he desires to be a part of, but it does not constrain the learner in being confronted with materials of a higher order or aspiring to master them. In other words, the target language can be viewed as the 'currency' of the community which, similar to autonomy itself, is prerequisite and ultimate aim at the same time. The teacher and more knowledgeable learners model the use of the target language and constantly motivate peers to do the same. Since language and culture are two sides of the same coin, by 'adopting' the target language the learner will also 'adapt' to the target culture and gradually embrace it to become a comfortable coat. Thus, becoming acculturated will also entail becoming autonomous which will gradually become a less risky undertaking. This is a process which gets to the learners' sense of self.

8. Learners' Sense of Self

The acquisition of skills and competences plays a central role in foreign language learning. Yet, in second language acquisition processes attention should also be paid to the affective components such as the learner's selves and identities which according to van Lier (2007, p.58) are defined as "ways of relating self to world". In neo-Vygotskian terms, foreign language learning is a deeply social process in "which the subject constitutes itself at the intersection between self and other" (Tschurtschenthaler, 2013: 103; Gasiorek & Van de Poel, 2014). Drawing on Kristeva's *sujet en procès* (1977), Kramsch points out that the "subject is continuously involved in the struggle between the symbolic and the symbiotic" (Tschurtschenthaler, 2013, p.103). In Kramsch's view, language learning is "another way of creating, conveying and exchanging signs, not primarily of acquiring new grammatical and lexical tools" (2000: 139-140), a task which learners approach as "both private, individual and public, social sign makers" (Kramsch, 2000, p.151). Thus, learning a foreign language requires learners to enter a continuous process of questioning, transforming and reshaping the sense of their 'unstable' self which can be considered as a work in progress (cf. Bruner, 2002; as cited in Murray, 2011, p.6). We concur with Murray (2011, p.6) who construes self or learners' sense of self as their understanding of who they are as a person which draws on their agency, their perceptions and

memories of their life experiences and social interactions, as well as their hopes and dreams of the person they would like to become.

The traditional closed foreign language classroom often simply requires learners to explore their sense of self as a "language learner or user in relation to a particular linguistic community or learning context" (Mercer, 2012, p.12) ignoring their understanding of who they are as a person formed by experiences mainly made outside the classroom and hopes and dreams of the person they would like to become in their life after higher education. We argue that students who feel empowered by a sense of autonomy are far more likely to use their past and future life experiences not only to enhance learning but to make their language learning a part of these experiences by incorporating topics which are personally relevant –Bruner's capacity to develop a sense of self "to control and select knowledge as needed" (1986, p.84)– and about which they have been, presently are or will be engaged.

9. Conclusion

Acculturation is a complicated and multi-faceted process which encompasses the struggles learners experience when entering higher education as their new educational and –at the same time– social environment with its own academic demands and expectations. The aim of this article was to review some of the core elements of learner autonomy and to explore some of its nexuses with acculturation. Where autonomy means that learners deliberately engage with their environment, but to a certain extent still decide on how and with whom to engage to what degree, acculturation portends that learners internalise the environment. They aspire to become one of the voices of the academic community and may –depending on their degree of acculturation– even become a persona.

While through becoming increasingly autonomous the learner has an increased impact on the learning environment and outcome provided that the environment allows the learner this freedom, in the process of acculturation the environment has an ever-increasing impact on the learner (which in the nexus autonomy-acculturation becomes a two way exchange). Therefore, in this article, we have tried to explain some of the cornerstones of both autonomy and acculturation. Moreover, we have revisited some key elements essential for an optimal nexus autonomy-acculturation in order to understand the nexus better.

In order to successfully acculturate, all stakeholders involved in the process, i.e. educational authorities, teachers and learners, as well the academic community at large, will have to abandon the conviction that higher education is an entity detached from past and future learning and will have to accept that it should provide space for incorporating past (and future) experiences of learning and individual perceptions and experiences of learner autonomy. This can only happen successfully if the discourse learners participate in is their own and is conducted in a language they understand and have active knowledge of. Moreover, curricula and syllabi which almost exclusively rely on prescribed content, skills and competences will not comply with this goal. In order to successfully grow in their studies and professional lives, learners not only have to become comfortable with the discourse, but also with the goals and objectives

of the new academic context (cf. Hayes, 2004; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). In order to give learners more genuine room to build a community of practice and to act as agents who construct the terms and conditions of their learning within this community, 'open' curricula and syllabi are vital. Closely connected to this, is the development and acknowledgement of self which, according to van Lier (2010; as cited in Murray 2011: 6) must be accompanied by an explanation of agency which he states "refers to the ways in which, and the extents to which, the person (self, identities and all) is compelled to, motivated to, allowed to, and coerced to, act".

Moreover, while it is increasingly acknowledged that learners should be encouraged and guided in their acculturation process, the role of the guide should not be reduced to the teacher but also include the learners' peers within and even outside the academic community of practice. If we take the overall goal of life-long learning seriously, acculturation has to make sure that the experiences made during the process are transferrable to other contexts and this includes, apart from defining one's aims and content of learning, also selecting one's sources and companions en route.

In sum, successful acculturation requires learners to be autonomous to such an extent that they can pro-actively enter their new community of practice. Yet, autonomy should not simply be viewed as a prerequisite for successful acculturation as, even more importantly, autonomy should be fostered as a source for designing acculturation processes as well as the outcome of this lifelong learning process.

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