

Language learner autonomy: Myth, magic or miracle?

Lorna Carson, Trinity College Dublin

1. Introduction

The shift in emphasis away from the processes involved in teaching languages towards the processes involved in learning languages in formal educational contexts has brought about one of the most remarkable changes to the language classroom since the communicative approach. The elaboration of the role 'learner' in this paradigm frequently involves discussion of autonomy in language learning, although perhaps not in so many words. A range of terms are employed in the discourse as practitioners and researchers attempt to depict and unpick the involvement and responsibility of the learner in learning, including, inter alia, agency (van Lier, 2010; Swain, 2007), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000; see also Sisamakis, 2006 and Carson, 2007 with reference to foreign language learning), self-regulation (Pintrich & de Groot, 1990), learner-centredness (Tudor, 1996), learner engagement (van Lier, 1996; Ohta, 2001; Corno & Mandinach, 1983) and learner empowerment (Frymier et al., 1996; Schrodtt et al., 2008). The first section of this paper defines the notion of language learner autonomy, and review some key concepts – and misconceptions – related to this topic; the second section presents a case study of a university language programme designed to foster language learner autonomy.

2. Defining language learner autonomy

It is worthwhile considering firstly what language learner autonomy is not, in order to get some of the myths out of the way at the outset. I will deal with five of the principal myths that have evolved, drawn from Little's (1991, pp. 3–4) useful exposition in his seminal monograph.

Firstly, language learner autonomy is not self-instruction, nor self-access learning. The fallacy here mistakenly considers that language learner autonomy is a question of a learner deciding to study a language without a teacher, whether alone or within the context of a self-access study centre. There was an assumption in the early days of self-access language learning and of multimedia facilities, that learners, given enough materials, should be able to plug themselves into headphones and computer, and make sterling progress in a cost-efficient way without the aid of a teacher. It is certainly the case that some learners will achieve a high degree of autonomy within the context of self-instruction, but many do not. As Little (1991, p. 3) stresses, “[a]utonomy is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of how learning is organized”. It seems to me that this is the chief misunderstanding in any discussion of autonomy in language learning, the myth that it entails ‘going it alone’. Little dismisses such misconceptions by stressing that as “we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence” (ibid., p. 5). When we consider autonomy from the wider perspective of ontological development, it may be understood as self-determination, self-sovereignty, or the freedom from the control of others to decide on our actions, whilst nonetheless remaining responsible for what we are or what we do.

Secondly, language learner autonomy does not entail the teacher relinquishing control and initiative in the classroom. This may be considered as a ‘two-headed’ myth: first, that the autonomous language learning renders the teacher redundant, and second, that any intervention by the teacher may destroy whatever autonomy the learners have achieved, much as a delicate flower should not be handled by a gardener once in bloom. As I have already noted, exponents of learner autonomy make a distinction between independence and interdependence: “Autonomy [...] includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one’s own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways” (Kohonen, 1992, p. 14), and the teacher’s role in the autonomous

classroom remains key, in leading and modelling discourse, and through both regular learner/teacher interactions and expert/novice exposition and discussion. Autonomy entails more than being at liberty or being unconstrained, and notions that the teacher's role is outsourced to the learner are misplaced.

The third myth that has developed is that language learner autonomy is something that teachers *do to* their learners, in other words, it is mistakenly understood to be a new methodology. Here, as in many myths, there is an element of truth: learners are unlikely to become autonomous without active encouragement from their teachers; however, language learner autonomy cannot be reduced to a series of lesson plans, nor is it the latest methodology in language teaching's long history.

Fourthly, there is a mistaken assumption that language learner autonomy is a single, easily described, behaviour. This too is false. Whilst, of course, language learner autonomy is recognizable, and can be observed both in individual learners and in classroom practice, it takes many forms depending on learners: their age, their language proficiency, their needs, their classroom environment, and so on. Little states that autonomy "can manifest itself in very many different ways" (1991, p. 4).

Finally, closely related to the notion that it is a single behaviour, there is the myth that autonomy is a steady state achieved by certain learners. In fact, all learners have the capacity to develop autonomy in language learning, but this may vary, fluctuate and change even within one learner in time and across different areas of activity. A learner may be autonomous in one area, but may lack autonomy in another area. Allmark (2008, p. 43) draws our attention to the two distinct dimensions of autonomy: autonomy of agency, and autonomy of action, a most useful dichotomy: "It is probable that an action is autonomous only when performed by an autonomous agent but it is not always the case that an act performed by such an agent is autonomous."

Having considered what language learner autonomy is *not*, we can now turn more comfortably to consider what is understood to comprise the concept of language learner autonomy, which, rather than being a new-fangled notion, in many ways enjoys a long and illustrious epistemological history, and may be traced back, for example, to the Aristotelian understanding of autonomous action, social and moral responsibility. During the twentieth century, writers in diverse fields began to express concern for the healthy psychological development of individuals and society, through progress and fulfilment. Within humanist psychology, Rogers (1961, p. 170) defines autonomy in life as choosing personal goals, and accepting responsibility for oneself and one's actions. According to this view, being in control of one's actions and being responsible for their outcomes is a prerequisite for self-fulfilment. In Maslow's pyramid hierarchy of needs (1970), each level of physiological, safety, belonging and esteem needs contributes to the goal of self-actualization: to become all that the individual is capable of becoming. The focus on the agency of the learner in education developed within the adult education section in Europe, as policy-makers, curriculum designers and teachers began to envisage what is now called 'lifelong learning', to help workers survive in a period of industrial and social upheaval, unemployment and changing social mores. The principle was gradually elaborated that in the classroom, the learner, not the teacher, should be at the centre of the learning process (Nunan, 1988; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Tudor, 1996).

Definitions of autonomy share a core notion of autonomous learners as individuals who are in charge of their own learning, who take responsibility for their own learning process, and who are able to reflect on what and how they are learning. Henri Holec's seminal definition of autonomy in language learning is concerned with "taking charge of one's own learning", "to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). He argues that autonomous language learners are capable of determining the objectives of learning, defining its content and progression, selecting the methods used, monitoring and evaluating what is being learned.

Little's articulation (1991, p. 4) of the concept of language learner autonomy is perhaps the most widely cited in the field, although he humbly frames it as a 'provisional definition':

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.

This definition suggests that notions of 'proving' or 'believing' in language learner autonomy are misplaced when we engage in a systematic and practical consideration of autonomy in the language classroom. Much as it is clearly evident when a child learns to walk and talk, the exoteric reality of the autonomous language learner is similarly recognisable, by the very fact that the language learner becomes a language user and not simply a language repeater. In other words, the learner becomes a meaning-maker according to his own agenda. This capacity for autonomy, therefore, is something that is worked out "in the way the learner learns, and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts" (ibid.). Little (2007) argues the key to the implementation of learner autonomy in the language classroom lies in three principles: learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use. Carson and O'Rourke outline how "these principles can best be engaged in a classroom culture where planning and evaluation are a shared responsibility; where learners internalise these processes through opportunities for reflection, especially using tools such as learner diaries; and where both shared and individual processes are conducted through the target language" (2010, p. xxiii). Let's consider how autonomous language learning may occur with reference in turn to learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use.

2.1 Learner involvement

Practitioners' interest in autonomous language learning developed from a dissatisfaction with the processes and outcomes of language classrooms, which, whilst communicative in ethos, did not generate sustainable interest and participation. Hanne Thomsen recalls the beginning of her language teaching career, when she arrived "armed with an array of teacher-directed methods and techniques" (2000, p. 71):

I worked hard to come up with new and exciting things almost every lesson, and spent a lot of my time instructing the learners to do this and that [...] nearly all the initiatives were mine. I was "the owner of the projects", and through my enthusiasm I succeeded in making the learners take part in "my projects" with enjoyment and good results – or else I talked them into it. If I was away from school for a few days, it would honestly surprise me to discover how little work my learners had been able to do with their substitute teacher in my absence.

Thomsen analyses the reasons for this lack of motivation and participation, and concludes that "[my learners] were never allowed to take any of the initiatives or have any responsibilities for what was going on in the lessons, let alone their own learning" (ibid., p. 72). She states that "simply organizing the lessons took up most of my energy", leaving little time to get to know individual learners (ibid.). Dam (1995, p. 2) explains why she too decided to change her conventional language classroom:

I was up against the tired-of-school attitude [...] as well as a general lack of interest in English as a school subject. In order to survive I felt I had to change my usual teacher role. I tried to involve the pupils – or rather I forced them to be involved – in decisions concerning, for example, the choice of classroom activities and learning materials.

Learner autonomy literature stresses the key role of the teacher in fostering learner autonomy. Some teachers realize that their teaching does not necessarily lead to learning (Nunan 1996, p. 4). This realization may lead them to "abandon any lingering notion that [they] can somehow guarantee the success of [their] learners by [their] own effort" (Little, 1991, p. 45). The teacher, as "expert", guides learners as negotiate the content and modalities of the course syllabus, contents and activities. Learners are "novices" and

their perceived needs are not always in their own best interests; Cook gives the example (2001, p. 232) of graduate students who wanted to do more and more of the same activity week after week, until their teacher suggested helpful alternatives. Cook points that that fostering autonomy in the classroom necessarily requires “well-trained and confident teachers who can handle this constant process of negotiation” (ibid.), and that the teacher has the complicated job of turning learners’ initial preconceptions of language and of language learning into attitudes that are most effective for each particular learner; “the best thing I could do was to help them find ways of doing their own learning” (Nunan, 1996, p. 14).

The conventional language classroom generally entails the teacher selecting materials, initiating activities and feedback. Such an approach may hinder the learner’s developmental potential – that is, the potential to attain independent functioning in the target language, and to apply what has been learned to everyday life (Little, 1996, p. 206), as well as diminishing learner motivation (Dam, 1995, p. 2). For example, in an analysis of classroom discourse, Cook (2001, p. 143) concludes that about seventy percent of the utterances in most language classrooms come from the teacher. Moreover, most of these utterances are not authentic speech acts between two interlocutors, and are generally instances of “teacher talk”. This is characterized by a three move IRF structure – teacher Initiation, student Response, teacher Feedback (see also van Lier, 1996, on the IRF structure). Learners are limited to a small number of discourse roles, unlike the wide range of discourse roles they would normally assume outside the classroom. Frequently, the language classroom is seen as a forum for language practice, rather than language use (Cook, 2001, p. 147). This explains in part why learners may feel that the language classroom is distanced from their everyday lives.

Dam (1995), in her account of implementing an autonomous approach to learning, recounts how she asks learners to set learning targets, decide class and homework activities and find materials. From their first days of learning English, learners are given a significant amount of control over what

is being learning and how they learn it. Little, Ridley and Ushioda. (2002, p. 15) point out that “in motivational terms, the importance of this step can hardly be overestimated”. If learners are never given the opportunity to take responsibility and share in the range of decisions of the classroom, they will remain in a powerless, ineffective and ultimately frustrating, position. Dam concludes that, “the development of learner autonomy in the language classroom is a long and difficult process – especially for the teacher. “Letting go” and trusting in the learners’ ability to “take hold” [...] seems to be the biggest problem” (1995, p. 78).

Encouraging learner autonomy entails learners generating the content of both the long-term syllabus, and short-term activities, in negotiation with the class and the teacher: “the curriculum now comes from within the learner, as a product of his past experience and present and future needs” (Little, 1991, p. 7). Taking the learner as the point of departure for planning, choosing content and implementing a language course seems to fit with the sociocultural understanding of how learners develop skills and proficiency. Designing a syllabus or learning activities without taking into account learners’ prior knowledge is unlikely to enhance linguistic proficiency. Little (ibid., p. 13) argues that “learning is possible only to the extent that the learner is able to integrate the new information that is being offered with the sum of his experience to date”.

2.2 Learner reflection

Secondly, as Little, Ridley and Ushioda (2002, p. 17) argue, it is impossible for learners to accept responsibility for something, and then act on that responsibility, without thinking about what they are doing. The kind of empowering and motivating responsibility described above begins as a group responsibility, accompanied by group reflection. The teacher and learners together make explicit their different objectives for the learning programme, negotiate content and activities, and evaluate their value and success. By providing scaffolding (Wood, Bruner et al., 1976) and corrective feedback, the role of the teacher in helping learners develop metacognitive proficiency in the

target language proceeds by offering a simple reflective structure for learners. As Bruner (1986, p. 127) has noted, “much of the process of education consists of being able to distance oneself in some way from what one knows by being able to reflect on one’s knowledge”. From a sociocultural perspective, reflection and assessment as a regular class routine precedes individual reflection and assessment. Reflection, rather than accumulation of knowledge, becomes a vital concern of education if the transmission model is discarded. Dewey emphasizes the sound psychological basis of the phrase “stop and think” (1938, p. 64). He associates thinking with self-control:

Thinking is thus a postponement of immediate action, while it effects internal control of impulse through a union of observation and memory, this union being the heart of reflection [...] The ideal aim of education is creation of power over self-control (ibid.).

Dam (1995, p. 31) uses five key questions as an aid for learner reflection: “What are we doing? Why are we doing it? How are we doing it? With what results? What are we going to do next?”. She also uses learner diaries as a tool to help learners move away from teacher dependency and take responsibility for their own language learning. Each learner has their own “English Diary” where they write about themselves in English. In the diary, learners record activities they have undertaken each day in class, note new words and expressions. They also use it for homework purposes, and write their reflections (individual, group or whole class) on the day’s work (ibid., p. 40). The diaries act as a medium of direct communication between teacher and learner. Thomsen (2000, p. 74) also makes use of logbooks as process tools in her English and German language classes, where her learners write down their work agenda for each lesson, and both teacher and learner can keep track of individual work, and positive and negative experiences of class activities.

2.3 Target language use

Encouraging autonomous language learning provides many and diverse paths into the target language, and extends the discourse roles open to learners. Studies of L2 acquisition within sociocultural theory understand the emergence of individual L2 language ability as contingent upon primary social interaction (Lantolf, 2000). Language proficiency is also a procedural skill, and like other procedural skills in other domains (such as swimming, driving, playing the piano) it develops through use (Little, Ridley et al., 2002, p. 19), “the necessary simultaneity of being and becoming”. Using the target language for all interactions in the language classroom is therefore a fundamental step for learners to develop linguistic proficiency. A classroom which fosters learner autonomy is characterized by the amount and variety of learner talk. Research suggests that formulaic expressions also provide valuable props for the learner, that are firstly memorized as unanalyzed chunks and then later analyzed and appropriated (e.g. Myles, Mitchell et al., 1998; Wood, 2002). The teacher is the “expert speaker” who provides much of this input. Working in small groups allows learners the opportunity to assume a variety of discourse roles. As learners work on activities and try to express themselves through the target language, the genuine dialogues they engage in contribute to their emerging proficiency in the language they are learning (Swain, 2000, p. 97). Whereas previously learners may have been limited in their utterances to responses to teacher-initiated questions, learners in groups become questioners, helpers and critics through a much wider range of utterances. This seems in turn to lead to more authentic and flexible discourse competence (Legenhausen, 1999a; 1999b).

To conclude the first section of this paper, we have firstly discussed what language learner autonomy is not, and hopefully we have dispelled some myths in its regard. In summarising the definitions of language learner autonomy, we can consider that language competence, both in L2 as in L1, “is to become ever more independent in one’s language use; and that, in turn means accepting conscious responsibility for one’s learning” (Carson & O’Rourke, 2010, p.xxiii). Finally, we reflected on why language learner

autonomy matters, firstly in an educational context in general, and more specifically, as to the learner's involvement, reflection and language use in what can only be described as a distinctive kind of classroom culture. In the second section of this paper, I will present a case study of a university language programme designed to foster language learner autonomy, with a brief aside on the challenges of 'spoonfeeding' in the context of the language classroom.

3. Language learner autonomy theory in practice (with a brief aside on spoonfeeding)

Most learners do not arrive in the university language classroom with the capacity to set their own learning goals, to reflect on their own progress, or to take charge of their own learning in any way. It is difficult, therefore, for students who have been accustomed to a 'spoonfeeding', teacher-led classroom to settle in to a classroom which aims to foster autonomous language learning. The authors of a review of the challenges of encouraging autonomous learning within higher education, Marsh, Richards and Smith (2001, p.389), comment on why this transition may be so challenging for learners: "It may be that learners are unaware of the nature of the choices open to them. It may be difficult to identify personal learning needs. It is quite probable that students simply do not know what they do not know and how to come to know it". From the language teacher's perspective at third level, it is sometimes easier to proceed in the manner to which learners have become accustomed. Little (2007, p. 23) writes, "few learners will arrive at their first class ready to take complete charge of their own learning; for most, self-management in learning will be something they have to learn, to begin with by taking very small steps". Learners will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to participate immediately in decision-making processes, to articulate learning goals, and to reflect on their learning progress. The issue of learners accustomed to spoonfeeding is a challenge.

If we unpick the extended metaphor of spoonfeeding in the context of language learning, we see the seriousness of the problem. Spoonfeeding in the domestic context can in fact be quite a relief at the beginning. At last the child is moving away from milk, and onto 'normal' food – the type of food that we adults may eat, although in a different form. Whilst spoonfeeding may be a little messy and slow at the beginning, it is nothing compared with the mess involved in helping the child to eat for him or herself. That is quite another story, and families across the world can describe the scenes of destruction in a kitchen once a toddler has a fork or spoon in its hand, usually wrestled out of the hand of their mother or father. Suddenly, spoonfeeding seems to be the clean, tidy, and – most importantly – fast, option. So, what does the sensible caregiver do? Take the spoon and spend the five or six years of the child's life handing over the correctly sized chunks of food right in the middle of the spoon? Spoonfeeding is necessary for a stage, and convenient for a little while afterwards, but ultimately the end result is a child who detects their own hunger, figures out what they want to eat, gets it, and who will, in several years, eat you out of house and home before moving on to a bigger and better refrigerator.

The ontological example of spoonfeeding reveals that it is not helpful for us as teachers to constantly break down a language into pre-prepared, bite-sized chunks, and deliver these in a uniform fashion to large cohorts of learners. Learners too evolve and grow, develop different interests, want to do different things with the language, and ultimately leave the classroom. How do we move beyond it, through the rather messy stage outlined above, and emerge in a classroom where learners are able to detect their own needs, can figure out what they want to do, where to find the right kind of authentic sources, can interact with those sources in meaningful ways, and will ultimately be able to leave the language classroom as an independent language user, able to engage in spontaneous communication to meet his or her own needs? And, most importantly, to keep on learning according to those needs throughout their lifespan? We need to be realistic about the type of journey that we engage on when we decide to open our classrooms to the

concept of autonomy in learning, and realise that, like weaning a child, autonomy is sometimes best digested in very small bites at the beginning. A central concern of any language programme at third level is necessarily to provide the type of support and scaffolding that students need to help them slowly take control of their own learning - where the challenge of the freedom to learn is accompanied by sufficient support when help is needed – because spoonfeeding is not sustainable in the long run.

4. The CLCS Language Modules

The Centre for Language and Communication Studies at Trinity College Dublin has been a pioneer in the field of language learner autonomy, in theoretical explorations of the concept, in teacher training and curriculum design, in materials development, and in assessment. The CLCS is responsible for the provision of the university's institution-wide language programme (the CLCS Language Modules), which allows students the opportunity to engage in foreign and second language learning (including English for Academic Purposes), and has been operational since 1993. As an institution-wide language programme, it provides language courses at Trinity College for students who are not taking a named language degree, but who seek to maintain their language study or take up a new language during their university years. It offers both credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing language modules which students may elect to take alongside their main degree subject.

The CLCS language modules¹ offer undergraduates the opportunity to engage in weekly, classroom-based language learning. The languages currently on offer are: English, Irish, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Turkish. These second and foreign languages are taught across the first four proficiency levels of the Common European Framework of Reference, from A1 to B2 level, with English for Academic Purposes taught at C1 and C2 levels. Each language module involves two evening contact hours per week throughout the academic year (twenty-four weeks); students sign up for one

¹ See Carson, 2010, for a more extensive review of the CLCS Language Modules.

academic year of study. We currently run eighteen language modules weekly, taught by a team of part-time native speaker teachers, and an annual cohort of native-speaker language assistants recruited from the university's incoming Erasmus/international students. The main aims of this programme are to encourage communicative competence in the target language, to enhance student mobility and career prospects, and to foster lifelong learning. Since the inception of the programme, we have emphasised language learning through language use, learner involvement and the importance of developing transferable skills, where the classroom is viewed as part of the student's preparation for continued language learning after graduation. These principles underpin our aim to foster autonomy in our language learners, and to help them acquire the skills necessary to take responsibility for their own learning.

We employ a task-based curriculum, and organise all classes and sessions around a series of learning projects, which permits considerable flexibility for individual needs to be realised. This programme includes both group and individual projects, which allow students to focus on their own interests (both academic and extra-curricular), as well as providing the opportunity to develop the types of transferable skills that are crucial in the workplace, and sometimes absent in academic degrees (e.g. giving an oral presentation to a group of people, fielding questions from the floor, team-work, negotiating group roles and responsibilities). Language modules are organised around a cycle of up to four group or individual projects over two terms, which encourage students to plan and take responsibility for their own learning activities, and to communicate spontaneously and through written texts in the target language.

The task-based curriculum is enacted predominantly through the target language, even at the lowest proficiency levels (which usually entails a great deal of acting and wild physical gestures in the first weeks of term). The first hour of each two-hour session usually includes a plenary session with some exploration of grammatical structures and vocabulary related to, and arising from, students' project work, with an input from a range of learner-selected text-books at ab initio level, and from more advanced grammars and

dictionaries in other classes. There are no set text books, rather students and teachers are free to use self-access facilities to select grammars, dictionaries and other resources according to their needs. The second hour of the class is entirely dedicated to project work. The language assistant attends in the second hour of each class, and, along with the teacher, moves around from group to group helping out with pronunciation, and reviewing students' written drafts of work. Examples of the projects undertaken by students include designing a travel brochure; organising an academic seminar (on participants' own degree subjects); presenting a debate; creating a website; compiling a newsletter; rewriting a well-known story; performing a piece of drama. Each project is designed according to the following principles: (i) appropriate to learners' needs and interests, (ii) generate authentic communication between participants, and (iii) lead to a tangible product at the end of the project cycle.

Project-work takes place during the second hour of every class, and sometimes, during the whole two-hour session. Students generally take about four weeks to complete their project, with in-class group work, group-work outside of class, and individual work at home. However, some groups negotiate with their teacher and the course coordinator for shorter, more frequent projects; other groups have negotiated with their teacher for a longer, one-term project of greater dimensions. Generally, the preparation period for a project is timetabled over three weeks, the project is presented in the fourth week, and the fifth week is dedicated to reviewing the project and to feedback. The schedule is not rigid. Sometimes classes choose to present their final work and receive feedback during a single session (in the case of smaller classes) or to divide group presentations over two sessions (in the case of larger classes). The schedule offers a dynamic and flexible structure, within which learners are free to pursue topics and tasks which align with their own interests and learning style. Some groups prefer to do their research at home, and to use the second hour of the class for feedback from their language assistant, or to rehearse their oral presentation; other students choose to meet up briefly during the week to practise their presentation and to use the second hour to search for authentic texts or to compile their final 'product'.

Students form small groups of between three and five learners, to choose a topic area (for instance, if the class is working on the topic 'academic seminars', one group may choose to work on medical ethics, as they are all students from the Faculty of Health Sciences, whilst another group may select to present on a interdisciplinary topic such as "identity in modern Ireland", and approach this from a variety of perspectives according to their main degree subjects, which may be Psychology, Sociology or English Literature).

Each project has an 'instruction sheet', or project outline, outlining the learning goals involved in the project (derived from the Common European Framework of Reference's scales and subscales); a description of the product they are expected to submit by the end of the project cycle, and a numbered list of tasks that they are expected to undertake during the preparation of the project. At the end of each project, each group must perform an interactive group oral presentation, in which each group member must participate. Students are encouraged to use visual aids and multimedia during their presentation, when they present their 'product' to the class. During the same session, students must submit an individual written project, which contains their contribution to the final product, draft versions of this text which must have been reviewed by their teacher, a list of new vocabulary learned during the project (with sample sentences drawn from their project showing the vocabulary items in use), copies of the authentic source documents they drew on, and a bibliography of all sources used.

Assessment within this programme is both formative and summative. The in-class projects are assessed through the group oral presentation, and individual written projects. Continuous assessment from these tasks contributes 50% towards students' overall end-of-year mark (of which 40% is derived from their project scores, and 10% derived from self-assessment). The remaining 50% is based on an end-of-year assessment, when the final group project is assessed formally by two raters, including an external assessor, and a one hour pencil-and-paper test is administered, comprising a dictation exercise and four C-tests. These marks are combined to give a

single percentage mark for their end-of-year certificate, and for their home departments to incorporate into their degree transcript. A self-assessment form administered immediately after each projects asks learners to assess their own linguistic performance using the descriptors and rating scales (phonology, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, on a five-point scale) used by their teacher and external assessor, and to assess the quality of their project's preparation. The self-assessment forms are collated to provide an average for the year, out of a maximum of ten percent. The first self-assessment form is not counted, and is used as for practice. We argue that by incorporating self-assessment checklists based on the same descriptors and rating scales used by teachers and external assessors, our learners have a very clear idea of what language proficiency entails, what exactly they are able to do in the target language, what remains for them to learner, and what steps they must achieve in order to achieve their goals. These types of detailed and informative descriptions of language competency help students to break down the monolith of language learning into manageable skills and subskills, and to identify much more clearly where they have made progress, and to recognise areas of difficulty. In the same way that we learn a language by using a language, we learn most about assessment when we assess; in the case of these learners, they learn more about their own progress when they are involved in their own assessment.

The language classroom, like many other classrooms in schools and universities, is conceptualised by many as a site of knowledge transfer, where discrete items of information are transferred from teacher to learner in a pre-determined order. Rather than information, we need to focus on communication - not in the narrow sense of the communicative approach where communication often became reduced to responding to the teacher, but in the widest sense of authentic communication: collaboration. In an excellent analysis of how we use language to collaborate and act together, Mercer (2000, p.6) writes, "We cannot [...] understand language use simply in terms of information transfer between individuals. Every time we talk with someone, we become involved in a collaborative endeavour in which meanings are

negotiated and some common knowledge is mobilised". He goes on to argue that (ibid., p. 8), "We are essentially social, communicative creatures who gain much of what we know from others, and whose actions are shaped by our need to deal with the arguments, demands, requests, entreaties, threats and orders that others make to us and we make to them".

The type of groupwork described in my case study, where learners are engaged in tasks that are appropriate task to their needs and interests leads both to authentic communication between participants, and to action – creating a tangible product at the end of the task, whether a written text, an artefact or an oral presentation. The advantages of this type of collaborative learning in the language classroom are manifold, and from a practical perspective, it doesn't involve any serious or permanent physical changes to the classroom, nor to the structure of a rigid curriculum. It does however, entail passing control from teacher to learners. Classroom discourse then widens from teacher initiation, student response and teacher feedback to encompass a broad range of discourse roles, where learners become planners, reviewers, learn to seek advice and to give advice, persuade, demand, request or entreaty, agree and disagree.

5. Conclusion

There is no magic involved in the approach to language learning described above, nor is it miraculous. We can verify examples of successful autonomous language learners in various contexts, as described in my case study – it is not a myth. As Little (2002) points out, autonomy, by definition, always works. However, the process of *becoming* autonomous does not always work. Like normal ontological development, our natural tendency to act as autonomous (although interdependent) agents can be thwarted and suppressed. In formal educational contexts and in the language classroom, there is often a loss of autonomy, where we operate under the control of other agents and according to another agenda. Autonomous language learners can take decisions related to their own learning and participate as authentic interlocutors in spontaneous meaningful communication (even at the very lowest proficiency levels and to

exchange very simple content), through the types of structures, help and advice provided by their teachers, and through programmes and curricula which allow for learner involvement, decision-making, responsibility and reflection – certainly more sustainable than spoonfeeding.

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