

Supporting Learners and Educators in Developing Language Learner Autonomy

Edited by Jo Mynard, Michelle Tamala, and Ward Peeters

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Candlin & Mynard ePublishing
Hong Kong

Published by Candlin & Mynard ePublishing Limited
Unit 1002 Unicorn Trade Centre
127-131 Des Voeux Road Central
Hong Kong

ISBN: 9798644809264

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David McLoughlin is an Associate Professor in the School of Global Japanese Studies at Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan. His main area of research is motivation in second language learning, looking in particular at the role of interest in supporting and sustaining self-regulated motivation and learning. Other research areas include the role of affect in language learning and its importance for self-regulated learning; attribution theory and language learning motivation; and language learner autonomy.

Jo Mynard is a Professor, Director of the Self-Access Learning Center, and Director of the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. She holds an Ed.D. in TEFL from the University of Exeter, UK and an M.Phil. in Applied Linguistics from Trinity College, University of Dublin, Ireland. She is the founding editor of *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal* and has also co-edited and co-authored several books related to learner autonomy and advising in language learning.

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Michelle Tamala has been interested in learner autonomy as a second language learner and later as a teacher of LOTE (languages other than English) and teacher of both migrants and international students. In her roles as classroom teacher, manager of both ILCs and SACs, and academic coordinator Michelle has had experience in implementing autonomous approaches in a variety of contexts.

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INTRODUCTION: Supporting Learners and Educators in Developing Language Learner Autonomy

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This volume explores some of the theoretical, empirical, and practical considerations when supporting educators and learners in promoting language learner autonomy. It contains selected papers from the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG events, held in Liverpool, UK from 1-5 April 2019, as well as chapters which address and further explore topics and trends that were discussed during these events. These chapters look at different aspects of learner autonomy that are not necessarily based in the classroom but which nonetheless support both students and educators as they become more autonomous in their practice. The findings that are presented throughout the chapters pay special attention to the ‘social turn’ in researching language learner autonomy development and second language acquisition, and focus on the social, interactive and co-dependent nature of the concept. The breadth of research presented provides a more holistic view of learner autonomy, and how many aspects of teaching and learning are connected to this. The volume concludes with a research agenda which draws on the social factors and agency that are likely to be the subject of further work in the coming years. This research agenda aims to inform and inspire the research field, and revisit certain methods, metaphors and terms we have used within the field for decades.

In the chapter entitled **How Much Can We Really Know About Learner Autonomy?** by Dominic G. Edsall, (Ritsumeikan University, Japan / UCL Institute of Education, UK), the author examines the concept of learner autonomy in Second Language Acquisition which is now more than 40 years old. Its seemingly simple definition remains difficult to pin down empirically which can be a challenge for some practitioners. This problem of empirical truth is intrinsically linked with our understandings of the underlying epistemology, and our own philosophical theories about what we know. This chapter attempts to address the current philosophical basis for learner autonomy, how much we as language teachers can actually know about learner autonomy, and some of the theoretical limits to

how we can investigate it further. Exploring the relatively new philosophies of Critical Realism and Social Realism from the wider educational literature, the author discusses how new insights could be gained. Edsall concludes by contemplating the possibility of not being able to definitively define the concept of learner autonomy and why we might have to settle on an incomplete but richer picture of the concept and its practice.

Practitioner Research in Preservice Teacher Education and the Promotion of Teacher Autonomy by Katja Heim (University of Wuppertal, Germany) and Stephan Gabel (University of Münster, Germany) describes project based learning for preservice teachers that is designed to promote Action Research and Reflective Practice to enable teachers become more active and autonomous shapers of learning and not just deliverers of curriculum content. Their article provides an insight into the *Low-Threshold Practitioner Research* that they carry out with their ELT students in their respective university-based teaching contexts. The projects that they supervise are realised during long-term school placements, which are a compulsory part of students' Master of Education programme in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. By introducing the ELT students to the ideas of Action Research (e.g. Burns, 1999, Mertler, 2017) and Exploratory Practice (e.g. Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2017), Heim and Gabel aim to empower them not only to take charge of their own professional development, so that they are not reduced to "passive receivers of curricula" (Barnes, 1976, p. 188), but also to contribute to shaping the whole "educational landscape" (Vaughan & Burnaford, 2016, p. 290) in the long run. The authors are convinced that it takes these kinds of independent teachers to create a culture of English language teaching in which more and more responsibility is handed over to learners (Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017). As is argued later in the chapter, this will not only be true if the ELT students' projects explicitly focus on aspects of learner autonomy in the classroom. The authors will argue that involving learners in joint discussions and decisions on any given aspect of classroom teaching, e.g. the aspect of classroom discourse, in itself already is a vital step towards learner and teacher autonomy.

In his chapter **Interest Development and Self-Regulation of Motivation**, David McLoughlin (School of Global Japanese Studies, Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan) investigates the importance of interest as an essential component of both self-regulation and

motivation which are both critical in the development of learner autonomy, especially outside the classroom. The author shows how interest not only initiates motivation but can also sustain it in the long term. The role of interest as a source and a driver of motivation has not always been emphasized enough, but its significance has been increasingly recognized in research over the last couple of decades (Hidi & Ainley, 2009; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Sansone, 2009; Sansone & Thoman, 2005, 2006). Because interest is now seen as crucial in enabling learners to maintain their motivation over time, it has a particular relevance to individuals in self-directed or ‘beyond the classroom’ learning contexts. In such contexts, learners have to regulate their own motivation to a great extent. They can do this by setting goals and monitoring their progress in attaining those goals. They can also maintain their motivation by finding what interests them and by developing that interest. Some studies have shown how autonomous learners use interest as well as goals to regulate and sustain their motivation (McLoughlin & Mynard, 2015, 2018; Mynard & McLoughlin, 2016). This chapter examines how a focus on interest helps learners become more effective at regulating their motivation, as well as how interest development can play an important part in creating more autonomous learners.

The fourth chapter, **Investigating the Autonomy-Supportive Nature of a Self-Access Environment: A Self-Determination Theory Approach**, by Jo Mynard, (Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan), and Scott J. Shelton-Strong, (Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan) takes the reader out of the formal classroom into a large self-access centre. In this chapter, the authors describe a research project designed to investigate the extent to which autonomy-supportive conditions exist for fostering English language use in a large self-access learning centre (“the SALC”) in a university in Japan. Taking a self-determination theory (SDT) perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017), the authors look at factors within the environment that encourage greater engagement and support for autonomous motivation for using English. The authors begin by exploring the views of the student population via a survey ($N=280$), and through structured interviews ($N=108$). They also draw on the observations of the team of 11 learning advisors (LAs) who work full time in the SALC using an observation framework. Results indicated that many of the features of the SALC were autonomy-supportive in general, but that some areas

could benefit from further enhancement. These enhancements might include communicating more clearly to the student body the underlying policies and initiatives relating to the SALC learning environment, additional scaffolding to facilitate competent engagement with the multiple learning affordances found there, and increased opportunities for regularly connecting with other students as a formal initiative within the SALC.

As more practitioners use social media as a part of their teaching, the chapter entitled **Peer Interaction and Scaffolded Support on Social Media: Exercising Learner Autonomy** by Ward Peeters, (Kanda University of International Studies, Japan & University of Antwerp, Belgium) will be of interest as it investigates both social media and Web 2.0, from the point of view of how scaffolding can be used successfully in these new environments. Peeters points out that in recent years the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has increasingly explored and assessed the possibilities and constraints social media and Web 2.0 hold for language education, resulting in an intricate collection of research projects, applications and recommendations (cf. Peeters & Pretorius, 2020; Reinhardt, 2019, Zourou, 2019). Next to the enquiry into the affordances of these technologies, the growing adoption of Web 2.0 in language learning has also reignited a much older debate: how to conceptualise and interpret scaffolding as a pedagogical technique (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003). Generally speaking, scaffolding refers to any kind of support that teachers, learning advisors or peers can provide for learners to help them progress in their learning. While the concept of scaffolded support in education has been around for several decades (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), the ways in which scaffolding takes shape in dynamic and discursive learning spaces, such as the ones on social media, deserve further scrutiny (Sato & Ballinger, 2016). Moreover, the impact of scaffolded support on the development of learner autonomy in these online contexts and what roles learners and teachers play in this process are insufficiently explored (Cappellini, Lewis, & Rivens Mompean, 2017; Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

In the final chapter of this volume, **Research Agenda for Supporting Learners and Educators in Developing Language Learner Autonomy**, Ward Peeters, (Kanda University of International Studies, Japan & University of Antwerp, Belgium) reflects on the ideas in this volume, that have explored some of the

theoretical foundations, philosophical underpinnings, practical applications as well as evaluations of learner autonomy and learner autonomy spaces. In the editors' view, the findings that are presented throughout the chapters exemplify the 'social turn' in researching learner autonomy development and second language acquisition, in which the social, interactive and co-dependent nature of the concept has increasingly come to the foreground (cf. Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017; Peeters & Ludwig, 2017; Toohey & Norton, 2003). This social turn also forms the backbone of the research agenda that is presented in this section, with questions about the context of learning, the different frames in which autonomy can develop and how we define 'value' in learning. By making suggestions for how to start answering these questions, this chapter aims to outline a pathway for future research in the field of learner autonomy.

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