Navigating Foreign Language Learner Autonomy

Edited by Christian Ludwig, Maria Giovanna Tassinari, and Jo Mynard

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การสะท้อนความคิดเกี่ยวกับการทำให้ผู้เรียนเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองได้ในบริบทของประเทศไทย:จากทฤษฎีสู่การลงมือปฏิบัติ — 455

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Notes on the Contributors (in Alphabetical Order)

Réka Asztalos is a Lecturer at the Department of Languages for Business Communication at Budapest Business School. Her research interests include blended learning, autonomous learning and informal learning. asztalos.reka@uni-bge.hu
Asztalos Réka adjunktusként dolgozik a Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem Gazdasági Szaknyelvek Tanszékén. Kutatási területe a blended learning, az autonóm nyelvtanulás és az informális tanulás. Email: asztalos.reka@uni-bge.hu

Cem Balçıkanlı is currently Professor of ELT at Gazi University (Turkey). His research interests include learner and teacher autonomy.

Anja Burkert is a Lecturer in the English Department of the University of Graz, Austria. She is particularly interested in the use of English as an academic language and the promotion of learner autonomy among her students. anja.burkert@uni-graz.at
Anja Burkert ist Lehrbeauftragte an der Universität Graz in Österreich. Ihr Hauptinteresse gilt der Förderung von Lernerautonomie sowie der Verwendung der englischen Sprache im akademischen Diskurs. anja.burkert@uni-graz.at

Natalia Cardona Villa is a Foreign Language Teaching Assistant at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad and Tobago. ncardonavilla@gmail.com
Natalia Cardona Villa es Asistente Docente de Español, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus en Trinidad y Tobago. ncardonavilla@gmail.com

Napassanant Chanuntika is an MA student at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. napassanant.19@gmail.com

Barbora Chovancová is an Assistant Professor at Masaryk University Language Centre in Brno. She encourages autonomy with her Legal English students and she is passionate about language counselling. Email: barbora.chovancova@law.muni.cz
Barbora Chovancová pracuje jako odborná asistentka na Centru jazykového vzdělávání Masarykovy univerzity v Brně. Podporuje

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autonomii při práci se studenty právnické angličtiny a věnuje se individuálnímu jazykovému poradenství.
barbora.chovancova@law.muni.cz

Kata Csizér is an Associate Professor at Eötvös University, Budapest. Her main research interests are the socio psychological issues in foreign language learning and teaching. wein.kata@btk.elte.hu
Csizér Kata docensként dolgozik az Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetemen. Kutatásai a nyelvtanulási motiváció szociálpszichológiai kérdéseivel foglalkoznak. wein.kata@btk.elte.hu

Pornapit Darasawang is an Associate Professor at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. pornapit.dar@mail.kmutt.ac.th

Ryoko de Burgh-Hirabe is currently a Senior Lecturer in Japanese at Ara Institute of Canterbury Ltd, New Zealand. Ryoko.deburgh-hirabe@ara.ac.nz

Larissa Dantas Rodrigues Borges is a Professor at Federal University of Pará (UFPA), Brazil. Her research interests include autonomy and teacher education. larissadant@gmail.com
Larissa Dantas Rodrigues Borges é professora na Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA), no Brasil. Dentre seus interesses de pesquisa, destacam-se autonomia e formação de professores.
larissadant@gmail.com

Kerstin Dofs is managing the Language Self-Access Centre at Ara Institute of Canterbury Limited, in Christchurch, New Zealand. She is currently undertaking a PhD on English as an Additional Language students at higher educational institutions. kerstin.dofs@ara.ac.nz

Katja Heim is currently a Substitute Professor in EFL didactics at the University of Wuppertal, Germany. In her work and research she mostly focuses on Learner Autonomy, Inclusive Practices, Low-Threshold Exploratory Action Research in Teacher Education as well as Digital Media in language teaching and teacher education.
Katja Heim vertritt zurzeit eine Professur im Bereich Fachdidaktik Englisch an der Bergischen Universität Wuppertal. In ihrer Arbeit und Forschung liegt der Fokus auf den Bereichen Lernerautonomie,

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Inklusion, niederschwellige explorative Aktionsforschung in der Lehramtsausbildung und im Bereich der Nutzung Digitaler Medien im Fremdsprachenunterricht sowie in der Lehramtsausbildung.

Yuri Imamura is a Learning Advisor at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. imamura-y@kanda.kuis.ac.jp
今村有里（いまむら・ゆり）神田外語大学ラーニングアドバイザー。imamura-y@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Napat Kaewkascholkul is an MA student at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. becknapat@gmail.com

Shu-Hua Vivien Kao is an Associate Professor at the Department of Applied English at Chihlee University of Technology, Taiwan. shkao@mail.chihlee.edu.tw
高淑華博士現任致理科技大學應用英語系副教授。shkao@mail.chihlee.edu.tw

Leena Karlsson is a University Lecturer in English at the University of Helsinki Language Centre.
Leena Karlsson on englannin yliopistonlehtori Helsingin yliopiston kielikeskuksessa.

Mijung Kim is a Learning Facilitator of Language Self-Access Centre at Ara Institute of Canterbury Ltd and also teaches Korean and English in Christchurch, New Zealand.
Mijung Kim 현재 뉴질랜드 크라이스트처치 Ara 대학의 영어자율학습센타에서 근무하며 동시에 한국어를 가르치고 초등학교 이솔교사로 재직중.

Fang-Fang Joy Kuan is an Associate Professor and Director of the Department of Applied English at Chihlee University of Technology, Taiwan. ffyao@mail.chihlee.edu.tw
關芳芳博士現任致理科技大學應用英語系副教授兼系主任。ffyao@mail.chihlee.edu.tw

Frank Lacey is a Modern-Language Teacher in Denmark. He is an in-service instructor specialising in learner autonomy (a topic which

SAMPLE

he is rather passionate about) and is also chairman of the English section in the Language Teachers' Association Denmark.
frank@jernsokkerne.org
Frank Lacey er sproglærer på Ådalens Privatskole i Ishøj. Han holder kurser med speciale i elevautonomi (et emne, som han er meget passioneret omkring). Han er desuden formand for engelsk fagudvalg i Danmarks Sproglærerforening. frank@jernsokkerne.org

David Little is a Fellow Emeritus of Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.
dlittle@tcd.ie

Vilson J. Leffa is Visiting Professor at the Federal University of Pelotas, Brazil. His main research interest is developing Open Educational Resources for Language Teaching.
Vilson J. Leffa é professor visitante da Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Brasil. Seu principal interesse de pesquisa é o desenvolvimento de Recursos Educacionais Abertos para o ensino de línguas.

Joe Lennon is an Assistant Professor at Masaryk University Language Centre, Brno, Czechia. joelennon@mail.muni.cz
Joe Lennon pracuje jako odborný asistent na Centru jazykového vzdělávání Masarykovy univerzity v Brně. joelennon@mail.muni.cz

Christian Ludwig is currently a Guest Professor of ELT at the Freie Universität Berlin (Germany) and joint coordinator of the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG. christian.ludwig@fu-berlin.de
Christian Ludwig ist derzeit Gastprofessor für Didaktik des Englischen an der Freien Universität Berlin (Deutschland) sowie einer der zwei Koordinatoren der IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG.
christian.ludwig@fu-berlin.de

Hassan Mahjoor is an MA student at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. hassanmahjoor@gmail.com

Walkyria Magno e Silva teaches at the Federal University of Pará, Brazil. Her research interests cover autonomy, motivation, and language advising under the view of complexity paradigm. walkyriamagno@gmail.com

SAMPLE

Walkyria Magno e Silva é professora titular da Universidade Federal do Pará. Seus interesses de pesquisa estão centrados em autonomia, motivação, aconselhamento em aprendizagem de línguas, compreendidos sob o paradigma da complexidade.
walkyriamagno@gmail.com

Marcella Menegale, Ph.D. in Linguistic Science, works at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. Her research interests include CLIL, learner autonomy and language intercomprehension.
menegale@unive.it
Marcella Menegale, Ph.D. in Scienze del Linguaggio, lavora presso l'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano il CLIL, l'autonomia di apprendimento e l'intercomprensione linguistica. menegale@unive.it

Vera Lucia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics and is an emeritus professor of Applied Linguistics at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). She is also a sponsored researcher of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) in Brazil. vlmop@veramenezes.com
Vera Lucia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva tem doutorado em linguística e é professora emérita de Linguística Aplicada na Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). É também pesquisadora do Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) no Brasil. vlmop@veramenezes.com

Diego Mideros a Lecturer in Spanish and Coordinator of the Spanish Language Courses at the Centre for Language Learning, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad and Tobago. Diego.Mideros@sta.uwi.edu
Diego Mideros es Profesor Asistente de Español y Coordinador de los cursos de lengua española en el Centro de Aprendizaje de Lenguas, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus en Trinidad y Tobago. Diego.Mideros@sta.uwi.edu

Vanessa Moreno Mota is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics (UFRJ) and a Literature, Portuguese and English languages teacher (IFRJ). vanessammota@gmail.com

SAMPLE

Vanessa Moreno Mota é doutoranda em Linguística Aplicada (UFRJ) e professora de Literatura, Português e Inglês (IFRJ).
vanessammota@gmail.com

Jo Mynard is a Professor, Director of the Self-Access Learning Center, and Director of the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. jomynard@gmail.com

Ayşegül Okay is a Lecturer of English language at Yıldız Technical University. Dr. Okay has written several articles on learner/teacher autonomy in international journals.

Siting Ou is an MA student at King Mongkut's university of Technology Thonburi. oui5277086932@163.com

Kemal Sinan Özmen works as a Professor of English Language Teaching at Gazi University, Turkey. He is interested in second language teacher education, teacher cognition and language testing.

Paola Palma is a PhD student in Linguistics and a Spanish Instructor at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad and Tobago. Paola.Palma@sta.uwi.edu
Paola Palma es estudiante de doctorado en Lingüística e Instructora de Español, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus en Trinidad y Tobago. Paola.Palma@sta.uwi.edu

Anjuli Pandavar is a recent British immigrant to Czechia., Coordinator for Internationalisation and an Assistant Professor at the Masaryk University Language Centre. She has been innovating in transformative education in several countries for the last ten years.
anjuli.pandavar@mail.muni.cz

Graziella Pozzo, former Teacher of English and teacher trainer for the Italian Ministry of Education, is a member of the association LEND and is still active as a facilitator in action research projects in schools.
Graziella Pozzo, già insegnante di inglese e formatrice per il Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, è membro dell'associazione

SAMPLE

LEND e attiva come facilitatrice in progetti di ricerca azione nelle scuole.

Nicole Roberts is a Senior Lecturer in Spanish in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago. She is currently the Head of Department. Nicole.Roberts@sta.uwi.edu
Nicole Roberts es Profesora Asociada de Español en el Departamento de Lenguas Modernas y Lingüística, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus en Trinidad y Tobago. Actualmente, es la jefa del departamento.
Nicole.Roberts@sta.uwi.edu

Eva Rudolfová teaches ESP and EAP classes at the Language Centre of Masaryk University, Czechia. She is also a passionate member of English Autonomously, a Counsellor and an ardent ambassador of life and transferable skills. Her key concept in her professional career is authenticity. rudolfova@fi.muni.cz
Eva Rudolfová je lektorkou angličtiny pro akademické účely a pro specifické účely na Masarykově Univerzitě. rudolfova@fi.muni.cz

Punyapa Saengsri is currently a Lecturer at the Department of Language Studies, School of Liberal Arts, KMUTT, Thailand. She has taught at Master Degree level for three years.
Punyapa.sae@mail.kmutt.ac.th

Martina Šindelářová Skupeňová is an English Language Lecturer at the Masaryk University Language Centre, Czechia and she has been involved in the English Autonomously project for 7 years, providing counselling sessions and leading various modules. martina.sindelarova@mail.muni.cz
Martina Šindelářová Skupeňová je lektorkou anglického jazyka na Centru jazykového vzdělávání Masarykovy univerzity a už 7 let se v rámci projektu Angličtina autonomně věnuje individuálním konzultacím a vede různé moduly. martina.sindelarova@mail.muni.cz

Christine Siqueira Nicolaides is a Research Professor at both Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos and Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. cnicolaides@unisinos.br

SAMPLE

Christine Siqueira Nicolaides é pesquisadora e professora na Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos e da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. cnicolaides@unisinos.br

Marja Suojala is working as a University Teacher of academic writing and Finnish as a first language at the Language Center, University of Helsinki, Finland. Her main interests are writing processes in higher education and autonomous learning.
Marja Suojala työskentelee äidinkielen yliopisto-opettajana Helsingin yliopiston kielikeskuksessa. Hänen kiinnostuksen kohteitaan ovat kirjoittaminen yliopisto-opinnoissa sekä autonominen oppiminen.

Klaus Schwienhorst is Director of the University Language Centre at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany. His research interests include computer-assisted language learning, learner autonomy, language policy and the design of language learning spaces. schwienhorst@fsz.uni-hannover.de
Klaus Schwienhorst ist Geschäftsführender Leiter der Zentralen Einrichtung Fachsprachenzentrum der Leibniz Universität Hannover, Deutschland. Zu seinen Forschungsinteressen zählen computerunterstütztes Fremdsprachenlernen, Lernendenautonomie, Sprachenpolitik und die Gestaltung von Sprachlernräumen.
schwienhorst@fsz.uni-hannover.de

Alexandra Szénich is a Lecturer at the Department of Languages for Business Communication at Budapest Business School, Hungary. Her research interests include language testing and autonomous language learning. szenich.alexandra@uni-bge.hu
Szénich Alexandra adjunktusként dolgozik a Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem Gazdasági Szaknyelvek Tanszékén. Kutatási területe a mérés-értékelés és az autonóm nyelvtanulás. Email: szenich.alexandra@uni-bge.hu

Maria Giovanna Tassinari is the Director of the Self-Access Language Centre at the Language Centre of the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research interests are learner autonomy, self-access language learning, language learning advising, and emotions and feelings in language learning. giovanna.tassinari@fu-berlin.de

SAMPLE

Maria Giovanna Tassinari ist Leiterin des Selbstlernzentrum am Sprachenzentrum der Freien Universität Berlin. Ihre Forschungsinteressen sind Lernerautonomie, self-access language learning, Sprachlernberatung/Sprachlerncoaching und Emotionen und Gefühlen beim Fremsprachenlernen.
giovanna.tassinari@fu-berlin.de

Pathamawadee Thanasitrittisorn is an MA student at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand.
pathamawadee.t@gmail.com

Charmaine Tukua is a Programme Leader / Tutor at ARA Institute of Canterbury Ltd in Christchurch, New Zealand. In the Department of Māori, Japanese, Pasefika and Indigenous Studies. Charmaine.Tukua@ara.ac.nz
Charmaine Tukua - He Kai-whakamānawa / Pouako ki te Whare Wānaka o ARA ki Waitaha i Ōtautahi ki Aotearoa. I te Tari o Te Reo Māori, Te Reo Hāpanihi, Te Reo o te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa me Ngā Kaupapa Taketake. Charmaine.Tukua@ara.ac.nz

Rigoberto Vazquez Breton is an MA student at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand.
rigobertovazquez@yahoo.com

Satu von Boehm is a University Lecturer at the Language Centre of the University of Helsinki, Finland. She has been involved in ALMS (Autonomous Learning Modules) since 2001.
Satu von Boehm työskentelee englannin kielen yliopistonlehtorina Helsingin yliopiston kielikeskuksessa. Hän liittyi ALMS-opettajien yhteisöön vuonna 2001.

Pawarit Wongpornprateep is an MA student at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. pawaritgb@gmail.com

Pamararat Wiriyakarun is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of Language Studies, School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi in Bangkok, Thailand.
pamararat.wir@kmutt.ac.th

SAMPLE

Yi-Chien Wang is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Applied English at Chihlee University of Technology, Taiwan. ycwang3232@mail.chihlee.edu.tw
王怡茜博士現任致理科技大學應用英語系助理教授。
ycwang3232@mail.chihlee.edu.tw

Kie Yamamoto is a Learning Advisor at Kanda University of International Studies and is currently pursuing an Ed.D at the University of Bath. ky321@bath.ac.uk
山本貴恵(やまもと・きえ)神田外語大学ラーニングアドバイザー。英国バース大学教育博士課程在籍中。
ky321@bath.ac.uk

Lenka Zouhar Ludvíková is a Lecturer of EAP and ESP courses at Masaryk University and Mendel University in Brno, Czechia. ludvikova@phil.muni.cz
Lenka Zouhar Ludvíková je lektorkou angličtiny pro akademické účely a pro specifické účely na Masarykově Univerzitě a na Mendelově Univerzitě v Brně. ludvikova@phil.muni.cz

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Sandro John Amendolara, Finland
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Ágnes Einhorn, Hungary
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Diane Malcolm, Canada
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Elina Maslo, Denmark
Fumiko Murase, Japan
Yoshio Nakai, Japan
Neslihan Ozkan, Turkey
Bettina Raaf, Germany
Gölge Seferoğlu, Turkey
Wareesiri Singhasiri, Thailand
Flávia Vieira, Portugal
Kirsi Marjaana Wallinheimo, Finland
Annette Wollesen, Denmark

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How do we Navigate Foreign Language Learner Autonomy?

Christian Ludwig, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany
Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan
Maria Giovanna Tassinari, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

A large body of work on foreign language learner autonomy has been published since the approach entered the arena of foreign language teaching and learning towards the end of the 1970s. *Navigating Foreign Language Learner Autonomy*, however, differs from existing publications in three key ways. Firstly, it provides novel insights into the status quo regarding the theory and practice of learner autonomy in foreign language education in different countries. Secondly, it does so in multiple languages. Finally, all of the contributions have been written by multiple authors, who were encouraged to explore the concept of learner autonomy through dialogue in the native or dominant language of the contexts in which they work. In this way, we have been able to put together a fascinating compilation of multiple voices from a wide range of linguistic and geographical backgrounds.

The idea for this book first came about in September 2018 right after the Independent Learning Association (ILA) conference at Konan Women's University in Kobe, Japan, and was further discussed during our stay at a remote temple lodge in Takachiho on the island of Kyushu. It quickly became clear that we wanted the volume to combine theoretical issues with a practical orientation, showcasing effective practice and new directions in research at institutions around the world. The more we thought about this project, the more we got hooked on the idea of putting together an edited volume in multiple languages which would give authors the opportunity to write about their experiences with implementing foreign language learner autonomy in their home or dominant language(s). Interestingly, though not surprisingly, quite a number of the contributors found it 'unnatural' to write about learner autonomy in their own, native language(s). As Eva Rudolfová from Czechia states: "the only thing that felt unnatural was writing in a language different to the one I do all the work and therefore all the reflections in, even though it is my native language."

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It is one of the major tenets of linguistic relativity, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, that our view of the world is influenced by the language we use to describe it. What would happen if German, Turkish, or Japanese and not English were used to conceptualise learner autonomy and report on autonomous learning and teaching practice? In other words, do *l'autonomia dell'apprendente* or *autonomía en el aprendizaje* describe exactly the same thing as *learner autonomy*? Furthermore, is the concept of learner autonomy interpreted in the same way in the different linguistic, cultural, political, and educational contexts in which it is developed? Here is a list of the countries represented in this volume: Austria, Brazil, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Republic of Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, and Turkey, with an even higher number of languages (and individual experiences) included in this volume. Across these cultural contexts, the practice of and research on autonomy differ in significant ways. This is partly due to the different cultural and educational traditions which often impact the way we teach and learn today. Some of the contributors explored these traditions when writing their chapters as the following statement by the authors from Taiwan succinctly put it:

> *During the course of the writing experience, studying and interpreting the ancient Chinese text in relation to the concept of learner autonomy has helped us gain a deeper understanding of how traditional educational thoughts affect the promotion of learner autonomy, both positively and negatively, in the teaching context in Taiwan. Besides, the reflective dialogue among colleagues using dissimilar approaches to foster autonomous learning have helped to facilitate professional development in expanding our teaching repertoire.* (Shu-Hua Vivien Kao, Fang-Fang Joy Kuan, and Yi-Chien Wang, Taiwan)

Furthermore, as Palfreyman (2003, p. 2) argues, "[…] in an era of increasing globalization, cultural context cannot be defined only by location" as learning and teaching in any location can involve educators from different cultural backgrounds. In some locations, learner autonomy is explicitly promoted through the curriculum and/or cultures of organizations and professions which are conducive to the development of learner autonomy. Novice language teachers in these locations also often benefit from decades of experience in

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fostering learner autonomy. Here, the ALMS (Autonomous Learning Modules) programme at the University of Helsinki Language Centre may serve as an example. In other locations, however, learner autonomy in practice continues to remain an isolated phenomenon. Often, in these locations fostering learner autonomy is about overcoming institutional, curricular constraints, or educational traditions.

In addition to its multilingual approach, the volume at hand also differs considerably from other publications in that the contributions are not only written by multiple authors but narrative and dialogic in nature. The use of reflective dialogue is increasingly being adopted in learning, professional development, and research as it helps to illuminate our individual perceptions of the world, ultimately encouraging us to question our own perspectives and adopt new ones. Each of the dialogues collected in this volume is in many ways unique. They take place between colleagues with similar or different cultural, educational and linguistic backgrounds, the same or different educational contexts, or across generations of researchers as these reflective statements by two authors show:

> *Writing this article together with different Brazilian autonomy researchers' generations brought us to exercise our autonomy by taking initiative, sharing our reflections, negotiating, learning from each other, and collaborating in order to achieve a common goal.* (Larissa Dantas Rodrigues Borges, Brazil)

> *I have enjoyed this first time experience and I was lucky enough to have been invited by my prestigious colleagues to join in the collaboration. It has been a very fruitful journey of shared teaching practice and reflective strategies. The new insights that have been shared have allowed us all to share how we teach and what we have learnt, e.g. looking at different strategies that we have either used or from our shared discussions and writings.* (Charmaine Tukua, New Zealand)

In the case of Italy, a dialogue was established between a teacher trainer and a university lecturer, helping them both to explore the challenges they face on a daily basis. In contrast to this, the Danish chapter provides an example of a dialogue among secondary students of English as a foreign language, providing the lead author of the

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chapter with unique insights into the students' perceptions of their learning environment:

> *Being a busy teacher means writing a chapter like this is one more task to fit into a busy schedule, but maybe it was worth the effort. The way my students view my interaction with them was very interesting for me, giving me an insight into their perceptions of my teaching practice. The fact that, although each student produced his/her section independently, they corroborated each other, meant that their testimony carried even more weight. And I am grateful for that insight.* (Frank Lacey, Denmark)

However, the dialogic nature of the volume itself as well as of the contributions also proved to be a challenge for all of us involved in this project. The written dialogues collected in this volume are the results of many (personal) conversations among the contributors as well as between the authors and us as editors. As Joe Lennon from Czechia writes:

> *It's one thing to have a face-to-face conversation, with all its vibrant and organic immediacy. […] But it's another thing to try to recreate that on paper. As we worked on this article, I kept thinking about how difficult it was to piece together various bits of discourse and research assembled by six different people over several months and create the illusion of a continuous dialogue.* (Joe Lennon, Czechia)

For us as editors, however, the main challenge was to orchestrate chapters in so many different languages, many of which we do not speak ourselves and turn everything into a coherent volume which, at the same time, reflects its diverse nature.

Although the contributions to this volume are very different in scope, they share many common elements. They all discuss how foreign language learner autonomy is theorised in the authors' cultural, linguistic, political, and educational context. Moreover, the authors explain how the idea of supporting students in becoming more actively involved in their own learning is being implemented and promoted in their institutional environments. This is due to the fact that, together with the invitation to contribute to this volume, the introductory chapter by David Little was sent to the authors, to provide them with the underlying theoretical underpinnings of learner autonomy of this

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volume to refer to as well as with some questions to guide them through their reflection and writing processes. Furthermore, all authors were asked to explicitly respond to Little's text. As Little writes:

> Contributors to this book have been asked to respond to this introduction in three ways: first, by telling us something of the conceptual networks associated with autonomy in their language; secondly, by describing the educational culture in which they work and the extent to which it welcomes and facilitates, alternatively repels and obstructs, the development of learner autonomy; and thirdly, by offering us a detailed account of the procedures they have adopted to harness and develop their learners' capacity for autonomy in language learning (p. 15).

In addition to this, all chapters include some reflective questions/tasks for the readers which will hopefully encourage them to reflect on their own practice, take first or further steps towards more autonomy, and engage themselves in exploratory practice.

Last but not least, all contributors were invited to send us their reflective statements, expressing their perceptions of the writing process in their native languages. Some of these statements have found their way into this introduction, illustrating how demanding and, at the same time, rewarding it can be to collaboratively write a multi-authored paper. We have collated all of the statements at the very end of this volume as an appendix. This is an accompniament to final chapter by the editors which presents a narrative analysis of these statements.

Putting together an edited collection in 13 different languages proved to be a more challenging endeavour than initially anticipated. While for many of the contributors it was not the first time that they wrote a co-authored paper, it was a pioneering experience to do so in their own language(s). Furthermore, writing their chapters not only encouraged many of the authors to engage in a dynamic process of collaboration and negotiation, but also in shared reflective practice. It may ordinarily be difficult to find time and opportunities to engage in this kind of reflective practice due to our busy work schedules.

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Reflective practice is one of the foundations of professional development and is defined as " […] a process associated with professional learning, which includes effective reflection and the development of metacognition, and leads to decisions for action, learning, achievement of goals and changes to immediate and future practice" (Hegarty, 2011, p. 20). The following comment on co-authoring the chapter by Yuri Imamura from Japan demonstrates how vital reflective dialogue was during the writing process:

> *Reflective dialogue with my colleague while writing this chapter has given me a precious opportunity to rethink learner autonomy in Japanese contexts and the significance of social dimensions in a learning environment in order for learners to thrive. Sharing our beliefs as learning advisors also helped me imagine future directions we would like to go in to support our learners.* (Yuri Imamura, Japan)

This edited volume is divided into three major sections: the two introductory chapters, the 13 individual chapters including reflective questions and a glossary containing key learner autonomy-related terms in the authors' languages with English translations, a narrative analysis of the author reflections by the editors, and data in the form of intact reflections by many of the contributors as an appendix. Readers will also find many of the authors' contact details. This will provide opportunities for readers to get in touch with authors as we sincerely hope that this volume will also be exploited as a way of sharing ideas and forming local networks in which the dialogue of this book will be continued and expanded.

We firmly believe that the present edited volume offers an important and innovative contribution to the field of foreign language learner autonomy as it not only brings together different voices but also hopefully encourages others to add their voices, in English, their own language(s), or any other language they feel comfortable writing in. Furthermore, it moves away from a diachronic perspective on how learner autonomy as an educational approach has evolved and focuses on how it has spread geographically. The volume at hand is hopefully not the end of this project but the beginning. As Kie Yamamoto, one of the authors from Japan, puts it:

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The opportunity of writing this book chapter reminded me that promoting learner autonomy is about being part of learners' journeys to their growth. I hope it encourages readers to pause for a moment to reflect on who they want to be in working with their students in their own educational context. (Kie Yamamoto, Japan)

We would like to conclude by expressing our extreme gratitude to David Little for his continuous encouragement and support of this project. It was at the local Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group (LASIG) event in Brno, Czechia, in September 2018, only a few weeks after the ILA conference, that he agreed to write the introductory chapter for a multilingual volume on learner autonomy and encouraged us to develop the idea further. If it had not been for him, this edited volume would never have been realised. A big thank you also to our authors for their enthusiasm and professionalism in writing their chapters and going the review process. Last but by no means least, our thanks also go to all the reviewers who put tremendous effort into reviewing the chapters.

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Introduction

David Little
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Learner autonomy is one of the most widely discussed concepts in second language education, and there is apparently no end to the publication of collections of papers that report on its implementation in diverse educational and cultural contexts. The present volume differs from its predecessors, however, in two respects. First, it comprises papers written in the authors' own languages, accompanied by a summary or full chapter in English. This has allowed authors to write out of their own linguistic and cultural identities as they report on the implementation of learner autonomy in their particular language learning environment. The editors hope that readers will rise to the challenge of grappling with texts they cannot read without difficulty, and that their struggle to understand will lead them into new paths of semantic, cultural and pedagogical reflection. Secondly, each paper has been written by multiple authors, so that its argument has necessarily developed out of interaction and negotiation. In this way it is intended that each text will contribute its own polyphony to the more complex polyphony of the collection as a whole. Of course, an enterprise of this kind runs the risk that the papers will be so various that they generate cacophony rather than harmony. That is why the editors have asked me to write an introduction that seeks to restate a non-culture-specific understanding of learner autonomy, and have asked the authors to take explicit account of my introduction in their contributions.

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Learner Autonomy: A Working Definition

In response to the question: What do we mean by "learner autonomy"? I cannot improve on the definition with which I began an article published twenty years ago:

> In formal educational contexts, the *basis* of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning; the *development* of learner autonomy depends on the exercise of that

> responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degree of success; and the *effect* of learner autonomy is to remove the barriers that so easily erect themselves between formal learning and the wider environment in which the learner lives. (Little, 1999, p. 11)

This definition rests on a simple argument: learning can only be done by learners themselves; this being the case, learning will be more efficient when learners reflect critically on the goals, methods, processes and outcomes of their learning; and it is through such critical reflection that learners empower themselves to transcend the limitations of their immediate learning environment. In practical terms, acceptance of responsibility and reflective engagement translate into learner self-management. A version of this argument underlies curricula that seek to develop the capacity for critical thinking on which effective lifelong learning depends; and learner autonomy in the sense I have defined is a precondition of success in scholarship and research. Of course, many (perhaps most) successful scholars and researchers do not owe their autonomy to the pedagogical traditions in which they have been educated. Rather, their skills of reflective self-management have grown quasi-spontaneously as their interest has drawn them ever deeper into their area of academic specialisation. That learner autonomy so often arises in this way, without benefit of pedagogical intervention, is due to the fact that it is a special case of a more general human capacity.

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Autonomy as a Universal Human Capacity

Autonomous behaviour is the goal of all developmental learning. Whether we focus on first language acquisition or more generally on primary socialization and enculturation, it is clear that development equips the child to behave as an autonomous member of the family or community of which he or she is a member. Clearly, "autonomous" in this context carries an infinity of possible implications, all determined by local cultural conditions and constraints, but this does not affect the general point I am making. Autonomy is not only the outcome of developmental learning, however; it is also fundamental to its process. Toddlers do not wait to be taught their mother tongue. They are born with an interactive

> responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degree of success; and the *effect* of learner autonomy is to remove the barriers that so easily erect themselves between formal learning and the wider environment in which the learner lives. (Little, 1999, p. 11)

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