

STRATEGIES, COUNSELLING AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: WHY WE NEED AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

David Little
Centre for Language and Communication Studies
Trinity College, Dublin

Introduction

As a theoretical construct focussed on second language learning, learner autonomy has been with us for almost twenty years, since the publication of Holec's *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* (Holec 1979); and for at least as long there have been experiments in language pedagogy explicitly designed to foster the development of learner autonomy in practice. No doubt the elaboration of the theoretical construct and the success of at least some of the pedagogical experiments help to explain why more and more national and regional curricula now cite learner autonomy as a central educational goal (usually expressed as a capacity for independent critical thinking and/or self-reliance); and no doubt this in turn helps to explain why "learner autonomy" is increasingly claimed as a characteristic of thoroughly traditional and non-autonomous learning environments. But in reality pedagogies shaped by genuine engagement with the ideal of learner autonomy remain a rarity.

One reason for this no doubt lies in the capacity of educational cultures first to recognize innovative ideas – "That's a bit odd, but it looks interesting, and what's more it seems to work"; then to tame them – "Of course, we've really been doing that all along"; and finally to devour them without trace – "Whatever became of all that learner autonomy people were talking about a few years ago?" This process has been examined in illuminating detail by Mayher (1990), in terms of the assimilation of the "uncommon sense" of new and potentially threatening ideas to the "common sense" of established orthodoxy. Those of us who believe that the ideal of learner autonomy is more than a passing fad must resist the process, but we cannot prevent its happening.

Another reason why learner autonomy is not more widely achieved lies, I think, in the literature on learner autonomy itself. To put it bluntly, too much of that literature will not get us far in our attempts to change pedagogical practice because it fails to engage with the full reality of autonomy. It too often misses the point that successful experiments in learner autonomy reveal something profoundly true about the ways in which human beings learn, and the consequent point that these ways of learning reveal something profoundly true about how human beings *are*. Learner autonomy has to do with the cognitive but also the affective dimension; it challenges the individual but also the group; and it is certainly a great deal more than the pedagogical deposit of a particular philosophical and political tradition. Learner autonomy always has to do with the whole person in the particularity of his or her environment. That is what the "anthropological understanding" of my title is intended to imply.

I shall begin by explaining in greater detail what I mean by an anthropological understanding of learner autonomy. This part of my paper brings together arguments that have taken shape over a number of years. Inevitably I can offer no more than a preliminary sketch – a full elaboration is impossible at less than book length. I shall then look at three areas of the autonomy debate: strategies, learner counselling, and cultural difference. In each case I shall seek to isolate and describe those aspects of the debate that seem to me to raise problems for pedagogical practice, and shall suggest how an anthropological understanding of learner autonomy may help us to deal with them.

An anthropological view of learner autonomy

Let me begin with a brief self-quotation:

Human beings are autonomous in relation to a particular task when they are able to perform that task (i) without assistance, (ii) beyond the immediate context in which they acquired the knowledge and skills on which successful task performance depends, and (iii) flexibly, taking account of the special requirements of particular circumstances. (Little forthcoming)

I take it that autonomy in this general behavioural sense is the necessary *goal* of developmental learning, since without it we cannot count as fully mature or fully socialized. At the same time, however, it seems clear that autonomy is an obligatory *characteristic* of the developmental process, in two senses. First, we cannot help but be autonomous because we are self-producing organisms

(cf. the notion of "autopoiesis" elaborated in Maturana and Varela 1992). This means, for example, that our thoughts and experiences are ours alone; no one else can share *directly* in them; and the extent to which we can communicate them to others is seriously limited. Second, at every stage in our lives we exhibit autonomous behaviour *within the limits of our developed capacities*. For example, babies of 2-3 months are a long way from being able to communicate freely with parents, siblings and caregivers, but there is strong evidence to suggest that they are capable of taking the initiative in those pre-verbal interactions which establish the intersubjectivity on which communication and learning depend (cf. Trevarthen 1977). Like other forms of life, then, the human organism appears to be biologically programmed to strive for as much autonomy as possible. This is hardly surprising; for as social beings we fulfil ourselves in direct proportion to the degree of our achieved autonomy. In this connection, the opening sentence of Bandura (1997, p.1) has the ring of universal truth: "People have always striven to control the events that affect their lives".

Of course, even as a process rooted in autonomy, human development involves more than the unfolding of a biological programme. Self-producing we may be, but as terms like "interaction", "intersubjectivity" and "social being" remind us, babies, children, adolescents and adults necessarily develop under the stimulus of a particular environment which is constituted by sociocultural as well as physical factors. The role played by sociocultural factors in giving specific shape to early cognitive development was well caught by Vygotsky, who argued that higher cognitive functions do not develop innately but are internalized from social interaction (Vygotsky 1981, 1986). According to this argument – to take an example more or less at random –, children learn to reason for themselves as a consequence of being involved in interactions that submit shared behaviour to verbal analysis. Clearly, the notion that complex thought processes are internalized from social interaction implies a close relation between intentional thought and language.

The Vygotskyian view of cognitive development assumes that all humans share a common biological endowment, but accommodates the fact of almost infinite cultural variation as regards social behaviour and (internalized from social behaviour) patterns of thought. Such a view in no way impairs the argument that, autonomous in their constitution, human beings are predisposed to develop their capacity for autonomous behaviour. But it warns us that what counts as autonomous behaviour will vary from one sociocultural environment to another. In a very general sense we may wish to argue that all societies derive whatever stability they possess from the behavioural autonomy of their mature members; but we must not suppose that behavioural autonomy among the Tuareg of North Africa is built on the same range of knowledge and skills as behavioural autonomy among the Irish.

Having introduced the sociocultural dimension, it is necessary to insist that societies and cultures, no less than individuals, are in a constant state of flux; for just as societies and cultures act on individuals, so individuals act on societies and cultures. This dynamic relation between the individual and his or her environment is expressed in triadic form by Bandura (1997, p.6): "In [a] transactional view of self and society, internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events; behavior; and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bidirectionally". In other words, behaviour is determined partly by what happens inside us, cognitively, affectively and biologically, and partly by what happens outside us, in the environment; but at the same time, behaviour influences what happens both inside and outside us.

From what I have said so far it follows that the autonomy achieved developmentally and experientially must be susceptible of infinite variation, thanks to differences in genetic endowment and in environment. As regards environment, style of child rearing seems likely to have a major impact on the development of the individual's capacity for self-regulation. Baumrind (1973), for example, has identified three broad child-rearing styles – "authoritarian", "permissive", and "authoritative". Whereas authoritarian parents emphasize control and permissive parents emphasize nurture, authoritative parents "are seen as encouraging and nurturing while placing a constant pressure for mature and obedient behaviour" (Díaz, Neal et al. 1990, p.139) and "accompany their control efforts with verbal reasoning, willingly providing the rationale for their requests, commands and directives" (ibid.). Clearly, this provides another example of internalization from social interaction. Note that what is internalized integrates the affective (for example, emotions and attitudes) with the cognitive (reasoning and argument). Note also that the crucial developmental move lies in the transfer of responsibility for the regulation of behaviour from the parent to the child.

So far I have been concerned with autonomy as a defining characteristic and principal goal of developmental and, by extension, experiential learning. What about schooling and other kinds of formal learning? For our purposes, the chief distinction between developmental and experiential learning on the one hand and formal learning on the other is that, while the former arises spontaneously and is largely unconscious, the latter is always intentional, based on explicit plans and procedures. Vygotsky captures this in his distinction between "spontaneous" and "scientific" concepts: whereas spontaneous concepts are largely implicit and reflect our unmediated experience, scientific concepts are explicit and reflect culturally negotiated categories of thought – scientific, philosophical, ethical, and so on (Vygotsky 1986).

In this sense there is *a priori* an inevitable discontinuity between developmental/experiential learning and schooling; and it is the chief task of

pedagogy to find ways of overcoming this fact by establishing strong continuities between "school knowledge" and "action knowledge" (Barnes 1976). For "school knowledge" is useful in the longer term only to the extent that it is integrated with the learner's "action knowledge" and thus becomes a part of his or her identity. Another way of making the same point would be to say that schooling benefits the individual learner to the extent that it enhances his or her capacity for autonomous behaviour.

Logically there seem to be two preconditions for enabling learners to convert "school knowledge" into "action knowledge". First, it must be in principle possible to establish links between the "scientific" concepts presented to learners and the "spontaneous" concepts they bring to the classroom; this is a matter of ensuring that curricular content is not too remote from learners' out-of-school experience. Second, "scientific" concepts must be appropriately mediated. As Tizard and Hughes (1984) have shown, learning difficulties can easily arise in the early school years because of a serious mismatch between the discourse structures that have guided children's spontaneous pre-school learning and the discourse structures that shape what goes on in the classroom. In Vygotskian terms, the key to success lies in recognizing that all learning has its origin in supported performance mediated through social interaction, and shaping the discourse of the classroom accordingly (cf. Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development – Vygotsky 1978; also the empirical investigations reported by Tharp and Gallimore 1988, Mercer 1995). According to this view, the essential characteristics of effective classrooms must be: negotiation of short- and long-term learning objectives, the encouragement of learner initiatives, and the constant subjection of learning processes and outcomes to reasoned analysis and evaluation. And in all of this the touchstone of success is the gradual empowerment of the learners.

In relation to developmental and experiential learning I have argued that although the capacity for autonomous behaviour is innate, its development is susceptible of infinite variation. One significant variable will always be the extent to which the individual is explicitly aware of his or her capacity for self-regulation and the constraints within which it must operate. In other words, the behavioural autonomy that develops as part of spontaneous learning will in some cases remain largely implicit, while in other cases it will be accompanied and enhanced by critical reflection (this latter is a likely consequence of "authoritative" parenting styles, with their emphasis on verbal reasoning; see above). Much the same will be true of formal learning when the development of learner autonomy is not an explicit part of our pedagogical purpose. Some learners will develop their capacity for self-regulation in relation to a particular curriculum subject, probably as an extension of the behavioural autonomy they have already achieved out of school, and others will not; and those who do will vary in the degree to which they are explicitly aware of their autonomy. But when

the development of learner autonomy is central to our pedagogical purpose, it takes on the explicitness and intentionality characteristic of all formal learning.

The argument so far may be summarized as follows. Autonomy is both the goal and a defining characteristic of developmental learning. However, the extent to which human beings spontaneously develop their capacity for autonomous behaviour and the degree of explicit awareness with which they do so are infinitely variable. Formal learning succeeds to the extent that the learner is able to overcome the *a priori* discontinuity between spontaneous and formal learning, thus allowing "school knowledge" to become a part of "action knowledge". For this to happen, two preconditions must be met: it must in principle be possible to accommodate scientific to spontaneous concepts; and scientific concepts must be appropriately mediated. Appropriate mediation depends on a recognition that all learning arises from supported performance within a framework of social interaction. It thus requires that we make learners active partners in the pedagogical process, and it succeeds to the extent that learners become self-regulatory at the outer limits of their developing skills and knowledge.

Of course, when the goal of formal learning is proficiency in a second language, these general pedagogical prescriptions necessarily assume a more specific character. This character is determined especially by the fact that language learning is at once different from and the same as most other subjects in the curriculum. It is different because (unlike the learning of chemistry or mathematics or history) language learning also happens spontaneously and implicitly, as a result of entirely unconscious developmental processes; and it is the same in the sense that (like chemistry, mathematics, and history) it has its own set of scientific concepts – for example, grammatical categories. The dual nature of second language learning in formal contexts explains why the development of learner autonomy has two distinct though ultimately inseparable goals: autonomy in language use and autonomy in language learning. It also explains why the teacher has to provide support in two distinct though ultimately inseparable domains of performance: she must support the efforts of her learners to use the target language, but she must also support their efforts to control their own learning. If the development of autonomy is to be the goal of second language pedagogy, it must also be a defining characteristic of the pedagogical process from the beginning. This means that from the beginning the target language must be used as the preferred medium of communication in the classroom; it also means that from the beginning learners must be fully involved in the planning, conduct, monitoring and evaluation of the pedagogical process. The successful implementation of a pedagogy oriented to learner autonomy is a matter not of following a strict set of guidelines, however, but of responding appropriately to the needs of a particular group of learners in a particular sociocultural setting. An appropriate response will necessarily

embrace questions of strategy, learner counselling and cultural difference, and it is to a consideration of these three issues that I now turn.

Strategies

The current preoccupation with strategies has two sources: (i) attempts to define communicative competence (e.g., Canale and Swain 1980, Canale 1983) and to explore its operation in second language performance (e.g., Tarone 1980, Færch and Kasper 1983); and (ii) attempts to define the "good language learner" (e.g., Naiman, Fröhlich et al. 1978) and to draw from such definitions precepts for language learning and teaching (e.g., Rubin and Thompson 1994). Findings from both sources come together in publications like Rebecca Oxford's *Language Learning Strategies* (Oxford 1989).

Dominant tendencies in the empirical exploration of strategies have given rise to three widespread assumptions: (i) that strategies are always conscious and explicit; (ii) that for this reason they can be taught as a separate skill component in the second language classroom; and (iii) that the successful teaching of strategies will result in learner autonomy. These assumptions are not warranted by the best strategies research, but this fact in no way impairs the influence they currently exert on many members of the language teaching profession.

Strategies necessarily occupy a central role in an anthropological understanding of learner autonomy. After all, strategic control of language learning and language use is one of the obligatory components of autonomy. But because our anthropological understanding sees the learner holistically, we shall want to give a rather different account of strategies from the one that underlies popular notions of strategy training. Specifically, we shall insist (i) that strategies are not necessarily explicit and conscious; (ii) that they can be directly taught only in a very limited way; and (iii) that they are by no means the whole of learner autonomy. I shall elaborate briefly on each of these points in turn.

Canale and Swain propose that communicative competence has three components: grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic. In their definition, strategic competence is called into play "to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale and Swain 1980, p.30). In other words, strategic competence is the battery of strategies we can call upon when difficulties arise in communication. Canale subsequently extended the definition of strategic competence to include communication strategies that "enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g. deliberately slow and soft speech for rhetorical effect)" (Canale 1983, p.11), but still the tendency of the definition is primarily compensatory.

Canale and Swain's definition of strategic competence has the virtue of reminding us that developed proficiency in a second language depends to a high degree on automatic processing: in reciprocal oral communication, for example, we need to draw on conscious strategic processes only when something goes wrong. On the other hand, the definition presents us with two problems. First, it is clear that there are many communicative situations in which strategic processes play an "offensive" rather than a "defensive" role. For example, we are likely to prepare ourselves for a job interview by anticipating a number of possible lines of questioning and working out how best to respond to them; and we are no less likely to spend time carefully planning a letter of condolence to a friend we have not seen for many years. Second, a definition of strategic competence that concentrates exclusively on language use may encourage the assumption that there is a psychological disjunction at the strategic level between language use and language learning.

Both these problems are resolved by Bachman's definition of strategic competence as "an important part of all communicative language use, not just that in which language abilities are deficient and must be compensated for by other means" (Bachman 1990, p.100; see also Bachman and Palmer 1996). Bachman distinguishes three components of strategic competence: assessment, planning and execution (Bachman 1990, pp.100ff.), which together comprise "a set of metacognitive processes, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities" (Bachman and Palmer 1996, p.70). Among those other cognitive activities is, of course, language learning in all its ramifications. In short, the three components of strategic competence – assessment, planning and execution – are called into play whenever we have to perform a task of any kind, including communicative tasks and language learning tasks.

Now, when we use a communication strategy in Canale and Swain's compensatory sense we may be consciously aware that we are doing so, but equally we may not: at least some kinds of strategies can become part of automatic processing. And the same point needs to be made in relation to Bachman's much wider conception of strategic competence: assessing the requirements of a communicative situation and the linguistic and other communicative resources at our disposal, planning how to deploy our resources to meet those requirements, and executing the plan, are all processes that can be carried through at any point on a continuum ranging from complete automaticity at one end to the most explicit analysis at the other.

According to Bachman's definition, then, strategic competence underlies all human behaviour, automatic as well as conscious, spontaneous as well as deliberate. This has two important implications. First, just as they come equipped with a capacity for autonomous behaviour, *all* language learners necessarily

come to the learning task equipped with strategic competence, though this is no guarantee that they will possess the explicit strategies appropriate to certain tasks in language learning and language use. Second, if strategic competence is only partly conscious and explicit, it is highly unlikely that "strategy training" alone can achieve the all-round development of strategic competence that characterizes the autonomous learner.

McDonough (1995, p.83) points to two further reasons why we should view the teachability of strategies with some scepticism:

First, it is not clear that what differentiates good and poor learners is the choice of strategy; it may simply be the range and amount of use of strategies. Second, there are constraints on when a strategy works which are to do with individuals, possibly cultural background, type of problem, and proficiency level.

From our anthropological perspective, the two problems that McDonough identifies are subsumed in an altogether larger problem: we cannot account for classroom learning only in terms of the individual psychological processes that are the focus of strategies research. Classrooms are communities with cultural characteristics that derive from the larger environment in which they are embedded, the traditions and beliefs of the educational institution of which they are a part, and the culture-creating interaction of their members. By the same token, teaching is a sociocultural process. Drawing on Vygotskian theory, Gillette (1994, p.211) "questions the belief that positive learning strategies, in and of themselves, constitute the explanation of L2 achievement". As she points out, successful language learning depends on a great deal more than superior cognitive processing (*ibid.*, p.212). It also depends, for example, on the learner's attitude to the learning task and his or her capacity to sustain positive motivation; and it depends on the capacity of the members of the learning community to create and maintain an interactional framework apt to promote collective as well as individual learning.

According to our anthropological understanding of learner autonomy, then, the development of learners' strategic control of language learning and language use is of central importance, but there are strict limits to what we can hope to achieve by direct instruction. In general it is more helpful to think of the development of strategic competence as a naturally arising by-product of the two fundamental principles that guide our pedagogy. On the one hand, the part of strategic competence that operates below the threshold of conscious awareness will be developed by learners' attempts to use the target language as the dominant medium of classroom communication; on the other hand, by involving learners actively in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of their learning we should help them to develop an explicit awareness of the strategic options available to them both in language learning and in language use.

Self-access and learner counselling

The association between strategies and learner autonomy has been a particular concern of teachers in classrooms, especially at school level. The association between learner autonomy and counselling, on the other hand, is mostly an issue for universities and open and distance learning schemes. This is partly a matter of practical necessity. In recent years universities have come under increasing pressure to reduce their levels of staffing and have been encouraged to explore ways of compensating for this by using new technologies; hence the rapid growth of self-access centres to support language learning. At the same time, within adult education the development of these new technologies has encouraged the growth of open and distance learning schemes as alternatives to classroom-based learning.

In this domain, learner autonomy is often understood as arising from the organizational constraints of the system: self-access, open and distance learning schemes are defined partly by the fact that, unlike classroom learning, they are not directly teacher-led, and from here it is a short step to a definition of learners as autonomous simply because they do much of their learning in the absence of a teacher. But this should not obscure the fact that an altogether more sophisticated notion of learner autonomy has long played a central role in theories of adult education (see, e.g., Keegan 1996). Holec's *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*, for example, arose in part from the Council of Europe's concern with lifelong learning. In this perspective adult education is thought to make sense only if it provides learners with skills and knowledge that are of immediate use to them in their daily lives. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Little 1997), this is an essentially political view, according to which adult education

becomes an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man "product of his society", one moves to the idea of man "producer of his society". (Janne 1977, cit. Holec 1979, p.1)

Conventionally, developmental psychology ends its story in early adulthood. This corresponds to the commonsense perception that, whereas we develop, learn and grow through childhood and adolescence, we maintain a more or less steady course through adulthood, until the decline of old age sets in (cf. the illuminating discussion in Salmon 1985). The same perception is reflected in the commonsense view of education as a preparation for adult life,

and it can easily lead to the belief that learner autonomy is a matter of learner maturity. George Kelly's psychology of personal constructs (Kelly 1955) has contributed significantly to the conceptualization of learner autonomy in some quarters; so that it is not without irony that Kelly himself apparently subscribed to this view:

In high school perhaps you try to control students; you try to get them to do the things they ought to do [...]. But in the university the task becomes one of shifting from that, over to challenging them [...]. (cit. Fransella 1995, p.31)

The problem is, of course, that university students and other adults whose education to date has done nothing to develop their capacity for explicitly autonomous learning, are too often thoroughly bewildered by the demands of self-access, open and distance learning schemes. Hence the need to provide them with support and advice, usually termed counselling. Unfortunately the models of counselling that are being developed to serve self-access language learning in universities seem on the whole not to be based on a thorough exploration of learning in general and language learning in particular. On the contrary, they are typically content to work within existing pedagogical frameworks. For example, in an informative and sometimes illuminating account of the provision of counselling to support tandem language learning, Lewis, Woodin and St John (1996, p.109) explain that they "did [...] not encourage the main body of face-to-face tandem learners to take full responsibility for their learning", even though they claim learner autonomy as one of the constitutive principles of tandem learning (ibid., p.106). The same failure to grapple with fundamentals is evident in Mozzon-McPherson's claim that the language adviser supporting self-access learning is a new type of teacher whose role is to

- a. listen to the learner's needs and elicit further conversation;
- b. provide adequate and clear guidance and support for learners to work autonomously;
- c. monitor learning patterns and provide relevant and effective feedback;
- d. help the institution provide appropriate language learning opportunities;
- e. monitor resources in relation to learners' needs;
- f. train users to become proficient learners through better understanding of their learning processes.

(Mozzon-McPherson 1997, p.106)

One wonders how Mozzon-McPherson imagines classroom learning succeeds if these are not also the functions of the conventional teacher.

An anthropological understanding of learner autonomy requires that we look afresh at each learning situation and shape our practical arrangements according to individual and collective learner needs, sociocultural factors, and practical constraints. Given that all human learning has its roots in social interaction, the requirement of many self-access, open and distance learning schemes that learners work on their own poses a fundamental problem that is all too rarely acknowledged, far less grappled with at a theoretical level. The problem is, of course, particularly acute in the case of language learning, whose naturalistic version is always mediated through social interaction. If learner counselling, or advising, is to be developed as an effective support to learners in self-access, open and distance learning schemes, simplistic oppositions between teaching and counselling/advising must be abandoned and the role of the counsellor/ adviser must be theorized as just one of the roles which contributes to the construction of a language learning process (cf. the role analysis proposed by Levinson 1988, following Goffman 1981).

Cultural difference

If strategies are a particular concern of classrooms and counselling belongs to universities and adult education, cultural difference has been an issue especially for the teaching of English in non-Western environments and for the teaching of other languages in non-Western environments that have come under the influence of EFL. The worries expressed by Jones (1995, p.229) are typical: "concepts of autonomy and individual responsibility and freedom, as they figure in social as well as educational contexts, come laden with Western values"; "[t]o make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity" (ibid.). Views of this kind arise from an understanding of autonomy as an essentially Western liberal phenomenon, they emphasize the political implications of learner autonomy, and they are often influenced by post-modernist conceptions of culture and politics. How are we to respond to them? At a general level, of course, the anthropological understanding of learner autonomy I sketched in the first part of this paper is itself a riposte to the cultural relativist position, since it claims that the capacity for autonomous behaviour is universal, even though the behaviour itself will necessarily vary from place to place under the impact of particular sociocultural factors. Within this general framework there are at least three specific objections to the cultural relativist position.

First, arguments like those advanced by Jones may seem to imply that learner autonomy is the inevitable result of a particular set of sociocultural and political values. That this is not the case is demonstrated by the pedagogical tradition that dominates Western education systems. There is no doubt that the ideals of personal freedom and self-reliance are officially prized in the Western democracies; and no doubt either that there is some connection between this and the fact that (as I noted in my introduction) more and more national and regional curricula in Europe include the development of learner autonomy among their general educational goals. But (as I also noted in my introduction) pedagogies explicitly oriented to the development of learner autonomy are not widespread in the West. I take this state of affairs to be negative evidence in support of my anthropological understanding.

A second objection to Jones's argument is that it is based on a false assumption. Aoki (1994), Aoki and Smith (1996), and Pierson (1996) have all adduced evidence of various kinds to show that autonomy is by no means an alien concept in Asian societies. It is hardly surprising that this should be so. After all, formal learning whose goal is mastery must always, at least by implication, be concerned with the development of learner autonomy. This is no less true of cookery, basket-making and martial arts than it is of physics, geography and foreign languages. The central pedagogical problem, however, remains: how exactly are we to negotiate the construction of the learning process so that the learners become increasingly autonomous?

A third way of objecting to Jones's position is to point out that it overlooks the essential dynamism of societies and cultures and of the educational processes that they promote. It is true that individuals are influenced by the patterns of thought and behaviour characteristic of the environment they live in; but it is also true that those patterns are themselves always open to the influence, and in some cases the challenge, of individual behaviour. Because we are social creatures, we cannot avoid being influenced by others, and we cannot avoid influencing others in our turn. It is thus a fantasy to suppose that any pedagogy can be guaranteed to leave intact the traditions of a particular educational culture. All education is in principle a challenge to existing social, cultural and political values. Pedagogies focussed on the development of learner autonomy are explicit about this fact, and I take that to be one of their chief virtues.

None of this should be taken to mean that I wish to diminish the importance of cultural difference. On the contrary, a truly anthropological understanding of learner autonomy requires that our pedagogy take account of the sociocultural environment in which we are working. To date, most discussion in this area has focussed on differences between cultures understood as large and fuzzy entities: West versus East, Europe versus Asia, and so on. This should not obscure the fact that significant cultural differences exist within as well

as between societies. An anthropological understanding of learner autonomy implies that the specifics of our pedagogy will vary from place to place, sometimes in obvious and sometimes in more subtle ways. By the same token, however, we need to respond sensitively to cultural differences that occur locally. In Ireland, for example, state-funded schools in Dublin's inner city differ from independent schools in the suburbs as regards institutional culture on the one hand and the culture of the environment from which the pupils are drawn on the other. Because these differences ensure that there can be no straightforward and certainly no universally applicable prescriptions, they are one of the major obstacles to the widespread achievement of learner autonomy in school classrooms.

Conclusion

The arguments I have developed in this paper lead, I think, to three general conclusions. First, research focussed on strategies, counselling and cultural difference needs to broaden its scope. Specifically, research into strategies needs to find ways of taking account not only of individual cognitive processes but of the social, interactive nature of learning; research into counselling needs to explore much more fully than has been the case so far the discursive roles that in interaction with one another construct a process of language learning; and research into cultural difference needs to investigate the interface between universal human capacities and the particularities of sociocultural setting. Secondly, we need to explore and refine our understanding of learner autonomy by fleshing out and further developing the anthropological argument I have sketched in this paper. In doing so we shall probably find it necessary to familiarize ourselves with work in a number of areas not traditionally associated with language learning. Thirdly, we need to establish a firm bi-directional relation between theory and practice, research and pedagogy, for in the end theory must validate itself in practice, while practice must be susceptible of theoretical investigation. This is not such a tall order as may at first appear; for the processes of negotiation, reflection, interpretation and evaluation that are central to the development of learner autonomy should also be central to pedagogical research.

What, finally, about the larger educational scene? It may be that at some time in the remote future pedagogies oriented to the development of learner autonomy will be a majority rather than a minority pursuit. But if this happens, it will be as a result of bottom-up rather than top-down processes: via a gradually expanding network of small-scale action research projects and not because of general aspirations expressed at national level. Those of us who

have worked to promote the development of learner autonomy in our own classrooms or self-access centres have no doubt done so because we are convinced that it is the only worthwhile outcome of any learning process. But our frequent failures will have taught us that learner autonomy can never be achieved easily, straightforwardly or automatically.

References

- Aoki, N. (1994). "Autonomy in Asia." *Learning Learning* 1(4): 9-12.
- Aoki, N. and R. Smith (1996). "Learner autonomy in cultural context: the case of Japan". AILA Symposium on Learner Autonomy, Jyväskylä, Finland.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Bachman, L. F. and A. S. Palmer (1996). *Language Testing in Practice*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy. The Exercise of Control*. New York, Freeman.
- Barnes, D. (1976). *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Baumrind, D. (1973). The development of instrumental competence through socialization. In A. D. Pick (ed.), *Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. C. Richards and R. W. Schmidt (eds), *Language and Communication*. London and New York, Longman: 2-27.
- Canale, M. and M. Swain (1980). "Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing." *Applied Linguistics* 1(1): 1-47.
- Díaz, R. M., C. J. Neal, et al. (1990). The social origins of self-regulation. In L. C. Moll (ed.), *Vygotsky and Education. Instructional Implications and Applications of Sociohistorical Psychology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 127-154.
- Færch, C. and G. Kasper, eds. (1983). *Strategies in Interlanguage Communication*. London and New York, Longman.
- Fransella, F. (1995). *George Kelly*. London, Sage.
- Gillette, B. (1994). "The role of learner goals in L2 success". In J. P. Lantolf and G. Appel (eds), *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research*. Norwood, NJ, Ablex: 195-213.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of Talk*. Oxford, Blackwell.

- Holec, H. (1979). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Strasbourg, Council of Europe.
- Janne, H. (1977). "Organization, Content and Methods of Adult Education". Strasbourg, Council of Europe.
- Jones, J. (1995). "Self-access and culture: retreating from autonomy." *ELT Journal* 49(3): 228-234.
- Keegan, D. (1996). *Foundations of Distance Education*. London & New York, Routledge.
- Kelly, G. (1955). *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York, Norton.
- Levinson, S. C. (1988). "Putting linguistics on a proper footing: explorations in Goffman's concepts of participation". In P. Drew and A. Wootton (eds), *Erving Goffman: Exploring the Interaction Order*. Oxford, Polity Press: 161-227.
- Lewis, T., J. Woodin, and E. St John (1996). "Tandem learning: independence through partnership". In E. Broady and M.-M. Kenning (eds), *Promoting Learner Autonomy in University Language Teaching*. London, Association for French Language Studies in association with CILT: 105-120.
- Little, D. (1997). "The politics of learner autonomy". In G. Gabrielsen (ed.), *Fifth Nordic Conference on Developing Autonomous Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Copenhagen, Danmarks Lærerhøjskole: 2-9.
- Little, D. (forthcoming). "Language awareness and the autonomous language learner". *Language Awareness*.
- McDonough, S. H. (1995). *Strategy and Skill in Learning a Foreign Language*. London, Arnold.
- Maturana, H. R. and F. J. Varela (1992). *The Tree of Knowledge. The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*. Boston and London, Shambhala.
- Mayher, J. S. (1990). *Uncommon Sense. Theoretical Practice in Language Education*. Portsmouth, NH, Boynton/Cook (Heinemann).
- Mercer, N. (1995). *The Guided Construction of Knowledge*. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters.
- Mozzon-MacPherson, M. (1997). "The language adviser: a new type of teacher? An analysis of an emerging role". In D. Little and B. Voss (eds), *Language Centres: Planning for the New Millenium*. Portsmouth, CERCLES: 97-109.
- Naiman, N., M. Fröhlich, H. H. Stern and A. Todesco (1978). *The Good Language Learner*. Toronto, Ontario, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Oxford, R. L. (1989). *Language Learning Strategies. What Every Teacher Should Know*. New York, Newbury House.
- Pierson, H. D. (1996). "Learner culture and learner autonomy in the Hong Kong Chinese context". In R. Pemberton, E. S. L. Li, W. W. F. Or and H. D.

- Pierson (eds), *Taking Control. Autonomy in Language Learning*. Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press: 49-58.
- Rubin, J. and I. Thompson (1994). *How to be a More Successful Language Learner*. Boston, MA, Heinle & Heinle.
- Salmon, P. (1985). *Living in Time. A New Look at Personal Development*. London, Dent.
- Tarone, E. (1980). "Communication strategies, foreigner talk and repair in interlanguage." *Language Learning* 30: 417-431.
- Tharp, R. G. and R. Gallimore (1988). *Rousing Minds to Life. Teaching, Learning, and Schooling in Social Context*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Tizard, B. and M. Hughes (1984). *Young Children Learning. Talking and Thinking at Home and at School*. London, Fontana.
- Trevarthen, C. (1977). "Descriptive analyses of infant communicative behaviour". In H. Schaffer (ed.) *Studies in Mother-Infant Interaction*. London, Wiley: 227-270.
- Vygotsky, L. (1981). "The genesis of higher mental functions". In J. V. Wertsch (ed.), *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*. Armonk, NY, Sharpe: 144-188.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.