

Learner autonomy in language programmes for adult immigrants: what, why and how

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Nel suo contributo l'autore descrive come sono stati sviluppati dei corsi di lingua per migranti in Irlanda, corsi nei quali si cerca di sviluppare sistematicamente l'autonomia degli apprendenti. I partecipanti vengono coinvolti nella formulazione degli obiettivi, nella scelta delle attività e dei materiali d'apprendimento. Un approccio – introdotto con successo in Irlanda – che presenta molti punti in comune con quello seguito dal progetto *fide*.

Learner autonomy in action

For more than twenty years I have argued that the best and most durable language learning outcomes are likely to be achieved when we require learners to be autonomous: when we expect them to define their own objectives, select the learning materials and activities that will help them achieve their objectives, and regularly evaluate the results of their efforts (see, e.g., Little, 1991; 2007). I was converted to this view by the classroom practice of Leni Dam, a teacher of English in a Danish middle school (see, e.g., Dam, 1995), so I shall describe key features of her practice as a way of explaining what I understand by language learner autonomy.

From the beginning Leni Dam required her learners to be autonomous in the sense I have just defined because she believed that self-direction would produce the most effective learning. She reasoned that by setting their own goals and selecting their own learning activities and materials, always within the constraints imposed by the curriculum guidelines, her learners could not help but draw on what they already knew, about language and communication and about the world outside the classroom. In this way their learning was brought into interaction with their identity. By insisting that her learners must be the agents of their own learning, Dam was also seeking to counteract the 'tired-of-school attitude' so often displayed by young teenagers (Dam, 1995: 2); putting them in charge of their learning seemed an obvious way of exploiting their intrinsic motivation. Support for this approach to the challenge of learner motivation can be found in the self-determination theory of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (summarized in Deci, 1996),

who argue that self-motivation depends on satisfying three interdependent needs, for autonomy, competence and relatedness. According to this view, we are at our most motivated when we set our own agenda, successfully achieve our goals, and do so while feeling connected with other people.

The idea of relatedness, of connection with others, brings me to a second defining feature of Leni Dam's classroom practice. She saw learning not only in individual and cognitive terms, but also as a social phenomenon grounded in interaction and collaboration. In her version of the autonomy classroom, knowledge (proficiency in the target language) was collaboratively constructed. She expected her learners to set individual learning goals; and homework, usually undertaken individually, was obligatory, as was extensive reading in the target language. But the products of individual effort – for example, word cards or picture dominoes designed to support vocabulary learning – were always added to the learning resources of the class. And individual learning was pursued within the interactive framework of pair and group work that always resulted in the collaborative production of target language text – perhaps a story, or a collection of poems, or a short play that its authors performed in front of the rest of the class. In its social-interactive dimension Dam's autonomy classroom may be described as a self-transforming 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

A third defining feature of Leni Dam's classroom practice is this: from the beginning the target language was the principal medium of all classroom discourse, whether it was concerned with discussing and agreeing on goals, selecting and carrying out learning activities, or evaluating learning outcomes. From the beginning, in other words, the target language in its metacognitive as well as its communicative function was the channel through which the learners' agency was

required to flow. In this way the development of learners' capacity to manage their own learning was fully integrated with the development of their proficiency in the target language. In its insistence on language learning through language use, Dam's autonomy classroom shares with mainstream theories of second language acquisition the assumption that spontaneous, authentic use of the target language plays a central role in effective learning.

In Leni Dam's classroom learning was driven by a recursive cycle of activity: making plans, implementing them, and evaluating the results in order to make new plans. Effective management of this process required continuous documentation: logbooks to track the progress of individual learners, posters written by the teacher on the basis of interaction with the whole class to capture issues and content that had collective importance. What was written in logbooks and on posters was usually the product of talk and could in turn be used as a stimulus for further talk. In other words, in Leni Dam's classroom speaking and writing the target language were strongly interdependent processes. To sum up in a sentence: Dam's approach and the achievement of her learners quickly persuaded me that language learning is likely to be most effective when learners exercise their agency – take decisions, act on them and evaluate the results – through communicative and meta-cognitive use of the target language.

Integrate Ireland Language and Training: governing pedagogical principles

From 2000 to 2008 Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin, was funded by the Irish government to provide intensive English language programmes for adult immigrants with refugee status. By 2007 the



organization was offering courses at 12 centres around the country. That year it had 901 learners from 93 countries; 55% of them were female and 45% male; 642 achieved FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) certification in English at level 5 (school-leaving level); and 105 progressed to further or higher education. These are impressive results, and they were achieved by insisting on three principles derived from my study of Leni Dam's practice.

The first principle was that effective language learning depends on spontaneous, authentic use of the target language, in this case English. We can support language learning by doing many things that do not involve us in communication; for example, we can study grammar, we can employ various techniques to memorize the words we need to know, and we can practise pronunciation. But if we want to understand speakers of the language we are learning, we must listen to them; if we want to be able to read the language, we must read it; if we want to be able to speak the language, we must speak it; and if we want to be able to write the language, we must write it. From the first we emphasized to our refugee students the close relation between language learning and language use, pointing out that the more they used English, the more they would learn. We also insisted that what they learned in their classes must have immediate relevance to their lives outside IILT.

The second principle was that our courses must explicitly correspond to our refugee learners' needs. It is usual to distinguish between objective needs, which arise from the learner's situation in life and can usually be predicted with a fair degree of accuracy by language course providers, and subjective needs, which are determined by the individual learner's personality, attitudes, general motivations, special interests, and so on. The analysis of objective needs is an essential part of course design; subjective needs, by contrast, emerge and evolve only in the process of learning, and because they are individual they require an individual response. In other words, subjective needs are a matter not for course design but for pedagogy.

The third principle was that in order to elicit and respond to our learners' subjective needs we must acknowledge and respond to them as autonomous individuals. Each of them had a unique identity that had been shaped by their life

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outside the classroom and in another country (sometimes in several other countries); each of them had one or more home languages and cultures through which they continued to live much of their daily lives; each of them had responsibilities – caring for a family, earning a living – that helped to define their learning goals; each of them had individual interests; and each of them had priorities and preferences as learners. We responded to the autonomy that our refugee learners brought with them by giving them autonomy in the language classroom, making them responsible, among other things, for identifying learning targets and co-evaluating learning outcomes.

From principles to effective practice

IILT's approach to course design and implementation may be summarized as follows. At the beginning of each term our teachers negotiated a curriculum with their class (about 15 learners) on the basis of their objective and subjective needs. The programme for the term took account of the things learners needed to be able to do in the world outside the classroom; as far as possible it was also organized to take account of the priorities and preferences of individual learners. This meant that the interactive dynamic of the classroom was constantly shifting and evolving. For example, in a class that was preparing learners to enter the labour market, all students needed to know how to interpret a pay slip or open a bank account. But when it came to applying for a job they worked in groups according to the sector in which they were seeking employment.

We used this approach even with beginners who had little or no English. One of our teachers, for example, had a collection of about 20 laminated pictures that referred to different contexts of everyday language use. She pinned the pictures to the wall and gave each member of the class twelve small self-adhesive coloured stickers (there were twelve weeks in the term). Then she asked the students to put a sticker on each of the twelve pictures that were most relevant to their own needs. The programme for the term was constructed around the twelve pictures that attracted the largest number of stickers, though every effort was made to accommodate other pictures that at least one member of the class had voted for.

Learning was closely linked to life in Ireland. Each term every class would include in its programme a visit to a museum, a gallery, a public building that had played a central role in Irish history, or a parliamentary debate. Learning a language for communication always involves learning about how to behave in society. Immigrants need to know, for instance, how the host society organizes security, so we arranged for representatives of the police force to visit our schools and speak to the students. As all of this perhaps implies, we did not use textbooks. Instead we based teaching and learning on authentic texts and realia that gave learning social and cultural immediacy. Our students shared responsibility for sourcing these materials – we expected them, for example, to collect information leaflets and sample forms from government offices, banks, post offices, and so on.

We used a version of the European Language Portfolio as a way of ensuring that each student's learning was fully documented and providing continuity from term to term, especially when a change of teacher was involved. The ELP's checklists of 'I can' descriptors were used to identify learning targets, monitor progress and assess learning outcomes; and by associating ELP-based portfolio learning with the portfolio assessment on which FETAC certification depends, we ensured that our students' language learning was a first step in their integration into the Irish adult education system.

The learning experience that we gave our refugee students was not limited to functional language use. One of our teachers, for example, introduced a book-reading activity in order to improve her students' poor writing skills. She decided to use Penguin Readers, which present abridged versions of classic and modern English-language novels rewritten for learners of English. At first all students read the same book, discussing the story and answering comprehension questions in groups. But then the teacher built up a library of Penguin Readers and encouraged her students to take books home and read them at their leisure. All students engaged with this activity to a greater or lesser extent: in the course of a term every student in the class had read one or two books, some had read six or seven, and a few had read as many as twelve. This out-of-class activity had a noticeable impact on students' writing and speaking skills, and students themselves reported that the range of their vocabulary had improved significantly.

Reading simplified versions of books that were considered important in English-language culture gave the students a sense of achievement, so the teacher decided to build on this by asking them to use a simple template to write a review of their favourite book. The reviews they produced were displayed on the walls of the corridor outside their classroom, which

meant that students in other classes became aware of the book reading activity. Note that students began to read not on their own initiative, but because their teacher prompted them to do so; left to their own devices they might well have remained non-readers. But note also that the reading scheme succeeded only when students were given the freedom to choose what and how much to read – in other words, when reading could become part of their autonomous learning. Like the scheme itself, the book review template came from the teacher rather than the students, but it too served to extend the scope of their autonomy as they used it to reflect on how reading had opened new horizons for them while also helping to improve their English.

The letters of appreciation that our learners wrote after they had completed their course are the best confirmation of the success of our approach. The following unedited example is typical:

“I’ve lived in Ireland for one year and half. When I came here I spoke a little English, it was difficult to understand people and their culture. When you are able to speak you can open yourself to people. I was also a bit lost and worried about socialising with people. I remember all my first steps and first lessons. I was so quiet, I will never forget the atmosphere. I started to feel more confident because of the people who surrounded me. They were friendly and they helped each other. We learned from each other so much. Different cultures, languages and people from different countries. We were all there to learn English, to get some experience and to make friends. The teachers were so supportive. They encouraged us so much. I feel so lucky that I’ve been there. It’s like you sometimes feel that you can’t cope with it and then you look at people and they give you a smile and you feel really good. I made many mistakes and I’ve learned that it’s the only way to learn the language by making them. The teachers helped us to socialise with each other. They told us so much about this country and culture. Every day was like a new white page of the book that I’ve filled with new information. Every day I learned something new. Now when I have some chats with Irish people I’m able to speak with them and they can understand me. They tell me that I have good English. I smile and tell them about this school which helped me a lot. From this school I find out about GTI [Galway Technical Institute]. My next step was to get there for my future job and education. I was worried about how I’ll cope with the interview. My English teacher prepared me for it. And eventually I could do it. I was so happy. When the time came to leave the school I was sad, but I know that the door will always be open for me like my teacher said. I appreciate everything. The important thing is to start, to begin something even if it’s a small step. It’s the way to achieve anything you really want. It’s the lesson which I’ve learned from my school. My memories of the school are my treasure.”

Concluding thoughts: making best use of the *fide* project

The *fide* project has provided a rich resource with which to support the teaching of Switzerland’s official languages to adult immigrants. It has defined learning targets, taking as its starting point not a proficiency level but a detailed analysis of immigrants’ communicative needs according to domains of language use; it has developed communicative scenarios typical of each domain; and it has broken each scenario

down into its constituent steps. It has also analysed the extent to which learners at CEFR levels A1, A2 and B1 may be expected achieve the tasks defined in the scenarios. This is a significant innovation because it recognizes that adult immigrants are required to perform certain communicative tasks *whatever their level of proficiency*. The *fide* project has also produced videos of immigrants acting out some of these scenarios, a wealth of teaching/learning materials based on selected scenarios, and portfolio elements designed to support goal setting and self-assessment and encourage reflective learning. Open and flexible, these resources can easily be used to support the approach to language learning and teaching that I have described in this article: an approach that seeks to develop autonomy in language learning and language use by helping learners to exercise their agency through the target language. In my view such autonomy should be a key objective in all educational domains. But it is especially important in the case of adult immigrants, because their linguistic integration begins as soon as they are able to exercise agency through the language of their host community.

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