The Future of Language Learner Autonomy: Theory, Practice, Research

David Little

Trinity College Dublin

Four beliefs

1. Learner autonomy is a pedagogical imperative that is validated by successful practice; it is only secondarily a focus for research

2. Autonomous learning in any educational environment – self-access as well as classroom – depends crucially on the teacher or the manager of self-access programmes

3. A worthwhile theory of language learner autonomy (LLA) states clearly
   - What the teacher should do and why
   - What the learners should do and why

4. In relation to LLA, research has three functions
   - To illuminate and understand practice (Action Research/Exploratory Practice)
   - To strengthen theory by drawing on research from relevant disciplines
   - To validate or adjust theory on the basis of empirical research that is informed by a current theory of L2 acquisition

Four tasks for the future

1. To restate our theory of LLA in terms that are more convincing to
   – The language teaching mainstream
   – Language teacher education
   – L2 acquisition researchers

2. To use our theory to describe and question
   – the role we assign ourselves as teachers
   – what we want our learners to do and why

3. To promote Action Research and Exploratory Practice as integral to what we do as teachers and learners

4. To establish partnerships between autonomous language learning environments and empirical L2 acquisition researchers

The structure of this talk

- The chronological development of LLA theory

- A restatement of the theory in terms of
    - The dialogical imperative
    - The necessity of learner control
    - The inevitability of reflection and metacognition

- Implications of the restated theory for
    - Classroom practice/the role of the teacher
    - Action Research/Exploratory Practice
    - Language teacher education
    - Empirical research into L2 acquisition

- Conclusion

The chronological development of LLA theory

In the beginning …

Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning

COUNCIL OF EUROPE / CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE
Modern Languages Project

H Holec

PERGAMON PRESS

To take charge of one's learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.:

- determining the objectives;
- defining the contents and progressions;
- selecting methods and techniques to be used;
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
- evaluating what has been acquired

(Holec 1981: 3)

Points to note about Holec's definition

- His report was written under the aegis of the Council of Europe's Committee for Out-of-School Education: the focus is on adult learners and self-access learning

- In the 1970s the Council of Europe was concerned to promote the transformative power of adult education:

  - Adult education should become "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: 15; cit. Holec 1981: 3)

- The Council of Europe's adult education project rested on a strongly interactive/dialogic view of learning and the learner: this is absent from Holec's report

Points to note about Holec's definition

- Holec's autonomous learner is an apparently isolated individual who exercises cognitive and organizational control over his/her learning: a monologic view

- The lack of a social–interactive dimension may be due to Holec's interest in self-access learning based on the use of non-interactive technologies, especially the language laboratory

- Holec distinguishes clearly between the development of L2 proficiency and the growth of a capacity to manage one's own learning (see especially Holec 1981: 23)

- Holec's definition of the autonomous learner is not specific to L2 education: it can be applied to any domain of formal learning

Implementing this version of learner autonomy: two principles
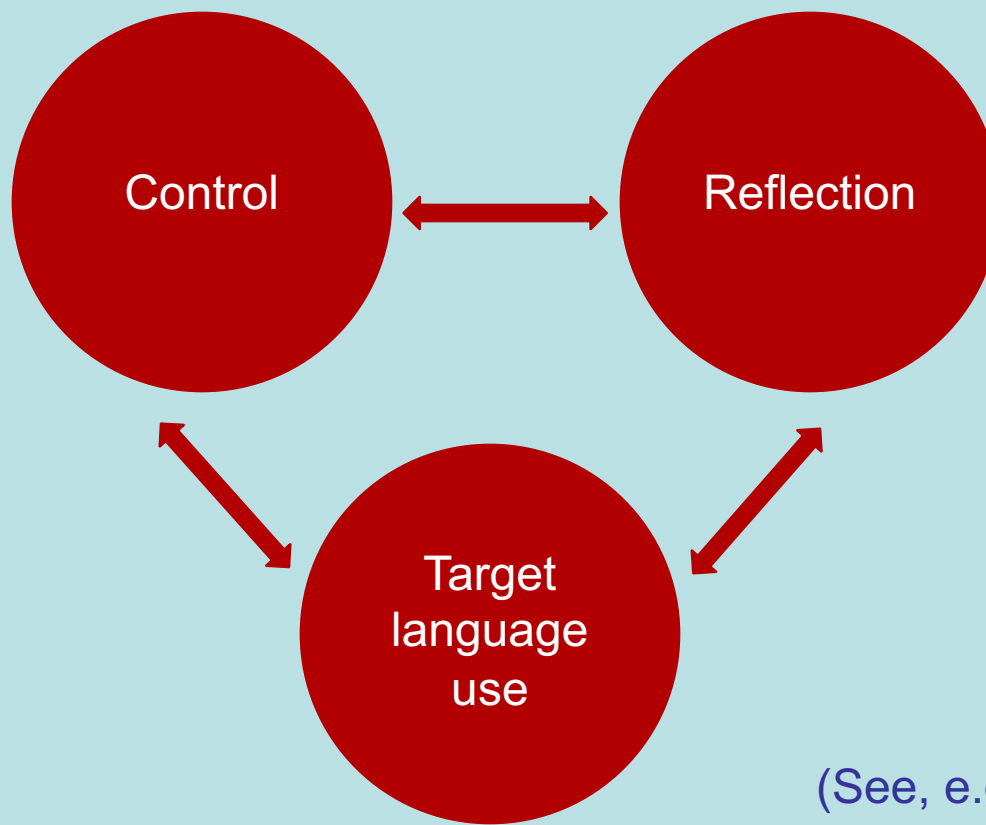
Control ⟷ Reflection
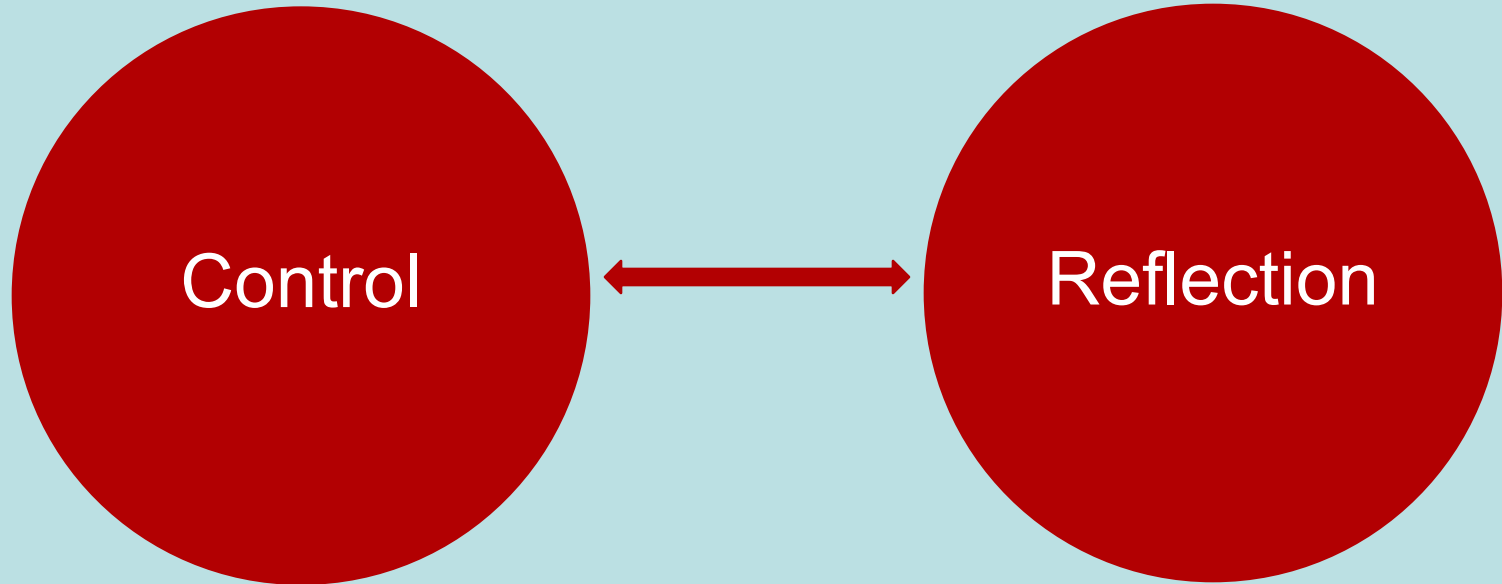
Towards a theory of *language* learner autonomy

- Leni Dam's classroom practice: learners manage their own learning exactly as Holec describes

- But

  - The dynamic of the classroom is strongly interactive (cf. Janne [1977: 3]: "self-learning must be the result of an interpersonal dialectical dialogue") – the exercise and development of learner autonomy are matters for the learning community working together as well as the individual learner

  - From the beginning, learners are drawn into spontaneous, authentic target language use on the basis of a symbiotic relationship between speaking and writing

  - From the beginning, the target language is the medium in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their learning

  - In this way learners' agency is channeled through the target language: autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin

    (For a full account, see Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017)

# Implementing *language* learner autonomy: three principles

The creation and maintenance of this autonomous language learning dynamic depends *entirely* on the actions of the teacher in the classroom or the staff responsible for self-access language learning programmes

Two problems that arise from presenting LLA theory in this way

- If we begin with learner control we
  - frighten mainstream language teachers
  - fail to capture the interest of L2 acquisition theorists and researchers
- If we simply add the principle of target language use to the principles of control and reflection, the explanatory component of the theory (autonomous use of the target language) is too easily overlooked/omitted: it seems to be an optional extra
- In order to make a more effective impact on the language teaching mainstream and L2 acquisition researchers, we need to restate the theory in more dynamic and compelling terms

A restatement of LLA theory

The essential dynamism of LLA theory

Interactive / dialogic TL use (communicative and metacognitive)

Control ⟷ **Reflection**
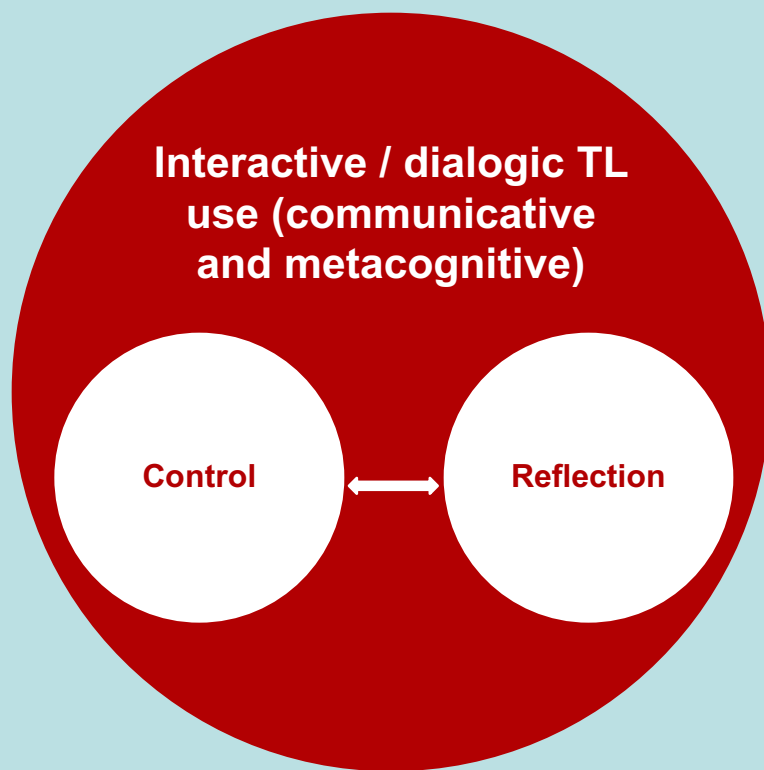
- The dialogic imperative
  - Language
  - Language acquisition
  - Pedagogical theory

- The necessity of learner control

- The inevitability of reflection and metacognition

The dialogic imperative: language

- Language evolved out of collaborative interaction (Lee et al. 2009); every utterance, in every mode and medium, implies an audience and a possible response (Bakhtin 1986)

- Language helps to shape consciousness dialogically
  - According to Mead (1934), consciousness entails "becoming other to oneself" (Gillespie 2005)
  - For Bakhtin (1986) consciousness is "knowing with others"
  - For Vygotsky (1987) consciousness is configured by inner speech (talking with oneself), which is internalized from social speech (interaction with others)

- Language helps to shape cognition dialogically
  - Individual cognition is impregnated with partially shared language, norms, knowledge and conceptual systems (Linell 2009: 79)
  - When we engage in reflective thinking, "internal" voices are invoked and interpenetrate (ibid.; cf. Vygotsky 1987, Bråten 1992, Fernyhough 2016)

The dialogic imperative: language acquisition

- Children acquire language thanks to an "interactive instinct" (Trevarthen 1992)

- L1 acquisition and informal L2 acquisition are the product of interactive language use: competence develops out of the individual's effort to perform tasks that are important to her (cf. the CEFR's action-oriented description of language learning as language use; Council of Europe 2001: 9)

- *All* current theories of L2 acquisition assign a central role to spontaneous, authentic, interactive use of the target language

- A notable example is Long's (2015) theory of task-based language teaching, which is supported by a large body of empirical research

The dialogic imperative: pedagogical theory

- In classrooms the individual–cognitive dimension of learning is embedded in social interaction

- Social interaction consists of dialogic talk, and the quality of dialogic talk determines the quality of learning

- An early influence on the autonomy classroom: the work of Douglas Barnes (1976)
  - The goal of education: to help learners assimilate school knowledge (curriculum content) to their action knowledge (a complex of experiential knowledge, previous subject knowledge, attitudes and beliefs)
  - The means to this end: exploratory talk (thinking aloud interactively)

- Subsequent pedagogical theory develops Barnes's ideas in a variety of ways, e.g. Alexander (2004, 2008), Mercer (1995, 2000), Wells (1999, 2009), Skidmore & Murakami (2016)

The necessity of learner control

- If learners are to participate as equal and autonomous partners in interactive target language use, they must have access to a full range of initiating as well as responding roles in classroom discourse

- The only sure way of achieving this goal is by giving them as much control of classroom discourse (= the learning process) as they can manage (bearing in mind that the ability to manage one's own learning develops over time)

- The tools that learners use to manage and document their learning (logbooks, posters, portfolios) also help to scaffold and shape their participation in the dialogic discourse of the classroom at macro and micro levels

The inevitability of reflection and metacognition

- It is impossible to manage anything without thinking about what you are doing, so the development of reflective and metacognitive skills goes hand in hand with the development of skills of self-management

- The talk that is used to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate learning is necessarily reflective

- All kinds of formative assessment, but especially self- and peer-assessment, are fundamental to the exercise of control and the development of reflection

- More generally, reflection and metacognition inevitably follow from any talk that is truly dialogic

Implications of the restated theory

Classroom practice/the role of the teacher

In a given context and in relation to a given curriculum

- How do we organize our teaching around the concept of dialogic TL talk?

  – If our learners are not yet able to participate spontaneously in such talk, what kind of scaffolding do we need to provide?

  – How do we ensure that we strike an appropriate balance between input and interaction?

- How do we expect our learners to exercise control?

  – Are we clear about the limits of learner choice (curriculum constraints)?

  – How do we ensure that our learners exercise and develop their autonomy collaboratively as well as individually?

  – What tools do we expect them to use to manage their learning – logbooks, posters, portfolios? Is there a role for e-portfolios?

Classroom practice/the role of the teacher

- How do we expect our learners to plan their own learning?

- How do we ensure that reflection follows from the exercise of learner control and vice versa?

- By what criteria do we expect our learners to assess themselves and one another?

- How do we ensure that self- and peer-assessment use the same criteria as formal tests and exams?
    - Can we use the curriculum to draw up a checklist of tasks or skills?
    - If the curriculum refers to the CEFR's proficiency levels, can we use the CEFR's illustrative scales to construct descriptors that reflect our learners' objectives?

Action Research/Exploratory Practice

- If learning is fully documented and regularly evaluated, the teaching/learning process will generate a rich corpus of data

- How do we use that data?
  - To inform the next phase of teaching/learning?
  - To report on our experience to a wider audience (conferences and workshops; publication)?

- Can we use an end-of-semester/end-of-year review of the progress and outcome of teaching/learning
  - As a fully integrated part of the teaching/learning process?
  - As a way of informing colleagues and sharing with colleagues and other learners?

- How can we use collaboration in Action Research (Burns 2009)/Exploratory Practice (Hanks 2017) to promote language learner autonomy more widely?

Language teacher education

- In pre- and in-service courses, how do we introduce teachers to the theory of language learner autonomy?
    - What should we ask them to read?
    - What should we expect them to do with what they read?
    - How can we ensure that their own learning experience is dialogically embedded (see Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017, Chapter 8)?
    - How can we ensure that they exercise control over their own learning and engage in reflection (including self- and peer-assessment)?
    - How do we develop their pedagogical skills such that they can use dialogic TL talk to create a language learning dynamic that is driven by learner control and reflection?

- How can we ensure that teachers are supported in their efforts to implement LLA theory?

Empirical L2 acquisition research

- Since the "social turn" in L2 acquisition theory (Block 2003), empirical research has focused increasingly on acquisition outside formal educational contexts

- Current theories emphasize the social as well as the cognitive dimension of language acquisition (Atkinson 2011)

- Although they have different views of the relation between the social and the cognitive, all current theories of L2 acquisition thrive on spontaneously arising data that is the product of agentive language use

- LLA theory generates learning environments in which agentive language use is the dynamic that drives learning forward: such environments await the attention of L2 acquisition researchers

Conclusion

To sum up ...

- Learner autonomy in Holec's version a matter of control and reflection, exercised monologically
  - Learning: an exclusively cognitive process
  - The learner: an isolated individual who thinks and acts in and by him/herself
  - Cannot explain why/how being an autonomous learner produces L2 proficiency

- *Language* learner autonomy the product of dialogic TL discourse driven by learner control and learner reflection
  - Learning: a cognitive but also a social-interactive process
  - The learner: a socially embedded and interactionally interdependent individual
  - Autonomy: an individual but also a collaborative phenomenon
  - Has explanatory power: autonomous target language use produces L2 proficiency

- The questions LLA theory requires us to answer in relation to classroom practice, teacher education and research

What about the future?

- Most of the literature on autonomy in L2 learning is based (often unwittingly) on a monologic understanding of learning and the learner
  - There is no obvious agreement on the role of the teacher
  - In many instances learners are expected to become autonomous without benefit of pedagogical intervention (cf. the concept of "readiness for autonomy")
  - The focus tends to be on autonomous behaviour rather than emergent L2 proficiency

- Derived from empirical investigation of successful classroom practice and supported by arguments drawn from many disciplines, dialogic LLA theory provides
  - a toolkit for planning, implementing, evaluating and researching *any* programme of L2 learning, whether carried out in a classroom or in a self-access centre
  - a framework for empirical exploration of L2 proficiency development, understood as a cognitive but also a social-interactive process

The role of LASIG

- Bring together colleagues who want to talk about learner autonomy, but without a shared theoretical framework
  - Remain on the fringes of L2 education
  - Continue to be ignored by L2 acquisition researchers

- Adopt, advocate and co-ordinate implementation of the dialogic theory of language learner autonomy
  - Gradually create a corpus of Action Research/Exploratory Practice
  - Seek partnerships with L2 acquisition researchers
  - Take language learner autonomy into the mainstream of L2 education and applied linguistics

The role of LASIG

- Bring together colleagues who want [obscured] autonomy, but without a sha[obscured]
  - Remain on the fringes of [obscured]
  - Continue to be [obscured]

- Adop[obscured] [obscured]ation of the [obscured] [obscured]tonomy
  - [obscured] Research/Exploratory Practice
  - [obscured] acquisition researchers
  - [obscured]rner autonomy into the mainstream of L2 education
  - [obscured] linguistics

À vous le choix!

References

Alexander, R. (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk*. York, UK: Dialogos.

Alexander, R. (2008) *Essays on Pedagogy*. London, UK: Routledge.

Atkinson, D. (ed.) (2011) *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*. London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge.

Bakhtin, M. (1986) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Barnes, D. (1976) *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

Block, D. (2003) *The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Bråten, S. (1992) The virtual other in infants' minds and social feelings. In A. H. Wold (ed.), *The Dialogical Alternative: Towards a Theory of Language and Mind*, 77–98. Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian University Press.

Burns, A. (2009) *Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Fernyhough, C. (2016) *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves.* London, UK: Profile.

Gillespie, A. (2005) Theorist of the social act. *Journal of the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35.1: 19–39.

Hanks, J. (2017) *Exploratory Practice in Language Teaching: Puzzling about Principles and Practices*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan

Holec, H. (1981) *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning.* Oxford: Pergamon. First published 1979, Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe.

Janne, H. (1977) *Organisation, Content and Methods of Adult Education*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe.

Lee, N., L. Mikesell, A. D. L. Joaquin, A. W. Mates & J. H. Schumann (2009) *The Interactional Instinct: The Evolution and Acquisition of Language*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Linell, P. (2009) *Rethinking Language, Mind and World Dialogically*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing

Little, D. (1999) Developing learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: A social-interactive view of learning and three fundamental pedagogical principles. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 38: 77–88.

Little, D. (2007) Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 1.1: 14–29.

Little, D., L. Dam & L. Legenhausen (2017) *Language Learner Autonomy: Theory, Practice and Research*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

The Teacher's Role in the Development of Learner Autonomy

Long, M. (2015) *Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching*. Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Mead, G. H. (1934) *Mind, Self & Society*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Mercer, N. (1995) *The Guided Construction of Knowledge*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Mercer, N. (2000) *Words & Minds: How We Use Language to Think Together*. London, UK: Routledge.

Skidmore, D. & K. Murakami (2016) *Dialogic Pedagogy: The Importance of Dialogue in Teaching and Learning*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Trevarthen, C. (1992) An infant's motive for speaking and thinking in the culture. In A. H. Wold (ed.), *The Dialogical Alternative: Towards a Theory of Language and Mind*, 99–137. Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1987) *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky. Vol. 1: Problems of General Psychology, Including the Volume Thinking and Speech*. New York, NY and London, UK: Plenum.

Wells, G. (1999) *Dialogic Inquiry: Toward a Sociocultural Practice and Theory of Education*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wells, G (2009) *The Meaning Makers: Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn*. 2nd edn. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.