

Book Review

Autonomy in language education: Theory, research and practice

Editors:

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Learner autonomy is widely perceived as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3) in second and foreign language (L2) education. The concept of learner autonomy first appeared in Holec’s (1979) seminal report *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning (AFL)* henceforth) to the Council of Europe and has attracted the interest of both researchers and practitioners since then. Many researchers have tried to theorize the concept and conducted numerous empirical studies to explore learner autonomy in different sociocultural and educational contexts (e.g., Benson, 2007; Chik et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2019; Little, 2022). The volume *Autonomy in Language Education: Theory, Research and Practice*, edited by Manuel Jiménez Raya and Flávia Vieira, is a collection of papers written by many leading scholars in the field of autonomy to celebrate the 40th anniversary of *AFL*. As a researcher in this field and a teacher devoted to the development of learner and teacher autonomy, the appeal of this volume to me is that it not only offers a holistic overview of research on autonomy over the past forty years, but also provides an overview of the latest conceptual understandings of autonomy, empirical research as well as teaching practices in the field.

The volume comprises fourteen chapters, plus the editors' introductory and concluding remarks. It opens with the editors' introduction, which zooms in on their motivation for compiling this volume, the historical background and development of Holec's (1979) view of autonomy, the marginal status of autonomy in language education, and their claim for the ultimate goal of commitment to autonomy (i.e., to develop teachers and learners into self-directed, socially responsible and critical individuals). The following fourteen chapters are divided into two separate parts, with six focusing on the historical and theoretical perspectives on autonomy and eight dealing with situated research on autonomy practices. The editors conclude the volume with a summary of the multiple understandings and practical inquiries concerning autonomy and suggestions for future endeavors.

Part 1 begins with Palfreyman's chapter on the contributions of Holec's *AFLL*. It first analyzes the key terms in *AFLL*, such as *self-directed learning*, *responsibility*, and *power*, and discusses their significance. It then presents the citation frequency of *AFLL* and its key terms in academic publications to illustrate its long-term impact. The following three chapters focus on the theoretical development of *self-regulated language learning* (SRLL), *advising in language learning* (ALL), and *learning beyond the classroom* (LBC), all of which are conducive to the development of autonomy. In Chapter 2, Gao and Hu interpret SRLL from a sociocultural perspective and also report a study to evidence that language learners can develop various strategies for SRLL through their negotiation with contextual resources, including artefacts, rules, community and their assumed roles. In Chapter 3, Mynard provides a detailed introduction to her revised *dialogue, tools, and context model* for ALL through the lens of an ecological perspective, illustrates its implementation in practice, and offers suggestions on the evaluation and further development of this model. In Chapter 4, Reinders introduces an ecological framework for practitioners to help learners move from in-class to beyond-class learning, with an emphasis on increased skill development and confidence-building. Chapters 5 and 6 both underscore the foundational role of Holec's (1979) view of learner autonomy and reconceptualize it from new perspectives. In Chapter 5, Benson and Lamb discuss his influence by sharing personal stories of autonomy practices and research from the 1990s to date. They further propose that, in the age of multilingualism, autonomy can be understood as a dynamic and situated construct within local or international multilingual contexts where learning takes place. In Chapter 6, Murray draws on complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) (Dörnyei et al., 2015) to examine learner autonomy, contending that this construct should be understood as an emergent phenomenon which arises from the interaction of cognitive, social and environmental elements, such as space and place, feelings and embodiment, change, imagination and others yet to be identified.

Among the eight chapters in Part 2, Chapter 7, by Paiva and Braga, and Chapter 11, by Tassinari and Martos Ramos, are reviews of autonomy research in Brazilian

journals and self-access language centers (SALCs) from practical and research perspectives. Both of these chapters conclude with suggestions for future explorations such as the integration of SALC into online learning environments and research on both learner and teacher autonomy. Chapters 8-10 report narrative inquiries into the development of learner and/or teacher autonomy. Chapter 8, by Chik and Melo-Pfeifer, is the only one focusing on young learners in this volume. It adopts a visual narrative approach which lays emphasis on the drawings of foreign language learning experiences by primary school learners in Australia and Germany. The findings show the differences with respect to learning activities and supporting individuals that contribute to the development of autonomy in the two settings. Chapter 9 is Karlsson and Bradley's autoethnobiography of their counselor advising experiences to promote self-directed language learning of students enrolled in autonomous learning modules at the University of Helsinki Language Centre in Finland. It highlights the importance of collegial pedagogy, collaborative practitioner research, and peer-group mentoring for developing both learner and teacher autonomy. In Chapter 10, Thornton investigates the changing role of SALCs through the narratives of three practitioners from the UK, Hong Kong and Japan. She emphasizes an increase in virtual self-access learning, the role of advising for developing learner autonomy, and the importance of support for self-access practitioners. Chapters 12-14 shift attention to autonomy in teacher education programs. In Chapter 12, Manzano Vázquez reports a study which revealed that most pre-service foreign language teachers in Spain manifested the willingness and opportunity to implement pedagogy for autonomy (PA), but doubted their ability in practice. In view of such findings, Manzano Vázquez proposes case pedagogy, videotaped lessons and peer observations to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of and competence for PA. Chapter 13, by Jiménez Raya, and Chapter 14, by Vieira, exemplify the development of student teachers' autonomy by constructing professional identity through possible-selves theory and conducting action research projects in Spain and Portugal. Both underscore the role of reflective thinking in teaching practicums.

Overall, as noted by the editors in their concluding remarks, this book succeeds in providing practitioners and researchers with a holistic understanding of autonomy from the perspectives of theory, practice and research. One notable merit of the book is that it enriches our theoretical knowledge of autonomy not only by placing it in historical and contemporary changing contexts, but also by linking it with key concepts and theories in mainstream language education such as SRLL (Oxford, 2017), CDST (Ortega & Han, 2017), sociocultural theory (Lantolf et al., 2018), ecological theory (Murray & Lamb, 2018) and identity (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). These developments testify to the complexity of autonomy as well as the growth of interest in autonomy within language education as a whole. The second merit of the book is the demonstration of multiple autonomy practices inside and beyond the classroom in diverse

sociocultural, educational and institutional contexts across the world, despite the editors' emphasis on the marginal status of autonomy in language education. As such, autonomy can be seen as a collective endeavor to transform language pedagogy. What is particularly appealing about the book is that most contributors play the dual roles of researchers and language teachers, teacher educators, or advisors. This has the potential to encourage practitioners to conduct educational research based on their reflective practices and to make their voices heard and valued by adopting various research methods such as narrative inquiries, action research and case studies.

All the above merits notwithstanding, most studies in this book focus on learner autonomy at the tertiary level. As emphasized by Jiménez Raya et al. (2007), learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent and entail the same democratic view of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation rather than oppression and reproduction. Therefore, it would be more inspiring to include more studies on teacher autonomy as well as both teacher and learner autonomy at all educational levels, in particular primary and secondary levels. In addition, this book includes more studies on autonomy beyond the classroom than those within the classroom despite the fact that both are important contexts for the development of this attribute. Readers who are interested in how to foster autonomy within the classroom need to turn to other resources for reference such as Lin and Reinders (2019) or Yang et al. (2022). Moreover, given the increasing attention to the close relationship between in-class and beyond-class teaching and learning in L2 education, the development of learner autonomy both inside and outside the classroom is an underexplored issue which deserves further consideration in theory, research and practice.

In conclusion, this book has surely achieved its purpose of highlighting the remarkable influence of Holec's (1979) *AFL* over the past forty years on L2 education. I highly recommend this book as it offers much needed insight into understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of autonomy and future directions for research and practice. Both novice and seasoned researchers as well as practitioners in various socio-institutional contexts will find this book accessible, informative and enlightening. In addition, with the increasing attention to autonomy in the education reforms introduced in many countries (Haque et al., 2023; Teng, 2018), this book may provide some practical implications for policy-makers and administrators with respect to developing and refining policies on learner and teacher autonomy as it entails the experiences and voices of learners and practitioners.

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