

Phil Benson

Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

pbenson@ied.edu.hk



Synergies France n° 9 - 2012 pp. 29-39

Résumé : Cet article se base sur trois questions pragmatiques concernant l'autonomie dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères, dans une perspective philosophique : 1. Les enseignants de langues ont-ils la double responsabilité d'inculquer l'autonomie personnelle de l'apprenant tout en lui apprenant une langue ? L'autonomie indique-t-elle que l'apprenant est libre de gérer son apprentissage sans contraintes ? L'autonomie signifie-t-elle un contrôle sur le contenu de l'apprentissage ? Puisque l'autonomie personnelle entraîne l'autonomie de l'apprenant et que cette dernière mène à l'autonomie de l'apprenant des langues, ma réponse serait 'oui' à chacune de ces questions. L'article présente également l'argument que l'autonomie dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères devrait se situer dans le champ plus élargi de l'autonomie personnelle et de l'autonomie dans la vie.

Mots-clés : autonomie, didactique des langues, philosophie, responsabilité des enseignants

Abstract: This paper addresses three practical questions about autonomy in foreign language learning from a philosophical perspective: (1) Do language teachers have a responsibility to foster personal autonomy as well as teach language knowledge and skills? (2) Does autonomy mean that learners should be unconditionally free to control their learning? (3) Does autonomy necessarily involve control over the content of learning? Arguing that personal autonomy entails learner autonomy and that learner autonomy, in turn, entails language learner autonomy, I offer a qualified 'Yes' as the answer to each of these questions. The paper also argues for the value of situating our understanding of autonomy in language learning within wider conceptions of autonomy in learning and autonomy in life.

Keywords: autonomy, language education, philosophy, teachers' responsibility

Introduction

The title of this paper highlights how interest in autonomy in the field of foreign language teaching is, in fact, related to three different aspects of autonomy: (1) language learner autonomy (autonomy in language learning), (2) learner autonomy (autonomy in learning), and (3) personal autonomy (autonomy in

life). Although we often use ‘learner autonomy’ as a kind of shorthand for ‘language learner autonomy’, foreign language teachers and researchers are mainly interested in the latter. But because foreign language learning is a kind of learning, arguments around language learner autonomy naturally draw on a wider set of arguments around learner autonomy; and because learning is a part of life, arguments around learner autonomy also draw on arguments around personal autonomy. Here, we are travelling from broader to narrower: What is the justification of for introducing an essentially philosophical concept, personal autonomy, into the practical matter of foreign language teaching and learning? We may also travel in the opposite direction. Can we justify situating foreign language teaching within broader educational and life goals, such that we foster language learner autonomy *in order to* foster learner autonomy and personal autonomy?

In exploring questions of these kinds, language teachers who aim to connect foreign language teaching with the kinds of lives that we envisage for our students can draw on substantial literatures on autonomy fields of education and philosophy, in addition to the literature on autonomy in language learning (Benson, 2011). This paper also explores connections between these three areas and begins from the idea that in the chain of thought that leads from the value of autonomy in life to the value of autonomy in language learning and back again, it is mainly *connections* between the links that are weak.

The main aim of this paper is to elaborate on the idea that that the philosophy of personal autonomy is an important source for the theory and practice of autonomy in language learning, by attempting to substantiate two arguments: (1) that personal autonomy *entails* autonomy in learning, and (2) that in situations where foreign language learning has a significant impact on the learners’ lives, autonomy in learning also *entails* autonomy in language learning. To bring these arguments down to earth, I will approach them through three practical questions that tend to divide language teachers whenever the topic of autonomy is discussed.

1. Do foreign language teachers have a responsibility to foster personal autonomy, or should they prioritize teaching language knowledge and skills?
2. Does autonomy in learning mean that learners should be unconditionally free to control their own learning, or are there grounds on which teachers can legitimately constrain their autonomy?
3. Does autonomy in language learning imply that learners should decide what they learn, or can autonomy legitimately be restricted to how, when and where they learn?

I will offer my own answers to these questions, but for the moment, I invite readers to pencil out their own answers before reading on. If your answers turn out to differ from mine, I will not try to persuade you to change your mind. I hope, however, that you will be persuaded that the questions can be addressed on philosophical grounds.

From autonomy in life to autonomy in learning

Q1. Do foreign language teachers have a responsibility to foster personal autonomy, or should they prioritize teaching language knowledge and skills?

Q1 concerns language teachers' responsibilities towards their students. Do these responsibilities begin and end with language knowledge and skills, or are there wider responsibilities concerned with the students' development *as people*? Institutional answers to this question will depend partly on the age of the students and partly on the educational setting. If the students are schoolchildren, teachers are likely to have some responsibility for their wider education and socialization built into their job descriptions. If personal autonomy forms part of the wider goals of the education system, as it does in many parts of the world, this may also extend to the development of personal autonomy. If the students are adults, or enrolled in a short course organized by a commercial language school, the teachers are likely to feel less responsible for developments in the students' personal lives. Even in schools, however, responsibilities for subject achievement and personal growth are liable to be conceptually distinct, with the latter falling into the sometimes specialized area of 'pastoral care'. In many settings, language teachers' work is also rather narrowly defined within the curriculum, such that it falls into the category of a 'service' to education, rather than education itself.

Viewing the question from a philosophical perspective, however, we have two major sources in European philosophy. The first is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who appears to have coined the idea of 'personal autonomy' through a metonymic shift from the idea of the autonomy of self-governing political entities to the ideal of a society of self-governing individuals. From Kant we also draw the principle that individuals should be treated as ends in themselves, and never as means towards other ends, however noble they may appear to be. The second is John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), who used the term 'sovereignty' rather than 'autonomy', and his vision of a society based on mutual respect for individual freedom and the principle that individuals should be free to act as they wish, so long as their actions do not cause harm to others. There is, of course, much more to be said about European philosophies of autonomy, but these two sources are sufficient to establish the key idea that a 'good' society is one that places primary value on the welfare and freedoms of its individual members.

The key issue in regard to educational autonomy, however, is whether personal autonomy is a natural state or one that people must achieve over the course of their lives. If people are 'born autonomous', there is no particular reason for education to provide with more than useful knowledge and skills. On this point, however, the modern philosophical literature takes a very clear position. Joseph Raz (1986: 83), for example, argues,

'Autonomy is not the natural state that individuals are in when left to exercise free choice. The ideal of individual autonomy is actually a strong theory of the good - that the good life is one in which individuals are the authors of their own lives.'

Robert Young (1986: 81) argues similarly that, 'in exercising autonomy, we shape our own lives'. This understanding of autonomy as a process of 'authoring' or 'shaping' one's own life implies that, although the potential for autonomy may be intrinsic the human condition, autonomy itself is something that must be acquired and maintained over the course of a lifetime. And the fact that we must *learn* to be autonomous brings education into the frame.

The relationship between education and personal autonomy is also strengthened by the idea that autonomy is a *social* construct. Raz (1986: 83) again argues,

Autonomy is socially defined in that the goals, preferences, and values of individuals, in sum the meanings of individual activities, are derived from the shared social matrix. Meaningful autonomy requires the existence of various social goods which the State has the duty to provide and which the citizens have duties to provide to one another.

In this sense, personal autonomy is not, as it is often misconstrued to be, a matter of the unfettered freedom of the individual. Instead, it is constituted within a kind of mutual contract, in which each individual agrees to provide the social goods that support the autonomy of others. In this sense, Kant's principle of treating individuals as ends rather than as means, together with Mill's principle of mutual respect for individual freedom, implies that learning to respect and support the autonomy of others is part and parcel of learning to be autonomous in one's own life. If educational systems are viewed as organized systems for the socialization of autonomous individuals, inculcation of respect and support for personal autonomy will play a crucial role in their educational functions.

My answer to Q1 is, therefore, that foreign language teachers do have a responsibility to foster personal autonomy, because personal autonomy entails learning, and further, because it is our mutual responsibility to ensure that this learning takes place. In a sense, this is no more than to state a collective social responsibility that covers all areas of social life. But in view of the particular role that educational institutions have evolved in regard to socialization and learning, it is also, perhaps, a special responsibility of teachers. While foreign language teachers' primary responsibility is to teach their languages, to argue that this responsibility overrides their responsibility to foster autonomy would be to suggest foreign language knowledge and skills are somehow irrelevant to personal autonomy. Later I will argue that the opposite is more likely to be case: foreign language knowledge and skills appear to be very relevant to personal autonomy in a multilingual world. The responsibility to foster autonomy could be diminished in settings where the students themselves conceptualize language learning as being distinct from the more general process of educational socialization, as, for example, in the case of adult learners who pay for language teaching as a service provided by a commercial operation. In such circumstances, the responsibility to foster autonomy is not entirely eliminated, however, because the teachers' own autonomy remains depends on their respect for the autonomy of those with whom they enter into the social relation of teaching and learning.

Learning to be autonomous

Q2. Does autonomy in learning mean that learners should always be unconditionally free to control their own learning, or are there grounds on which teachers can legitimately constrain their autonomy?

My argument so far points to the importance of all teachers, foreign language teachers included, striving for personal autonomy as an *outcome* of education. But the pursuit of this outcome does not necessarily mean that students should be autonomous in their learning at all times and in all situations. The answer to Q2, therefore, hinges on the extent to which the development of personal autonomy in educational settings implies respect for autonomy *within the educational process itself*? In practice, most teachers, including those who advocate autonomy, constrain their students' autonomy in certain ways. Are these constraints legitimate from a philosophical perspective?

In the field of language education, Crabbe (1993: 443) has argued that the 'ideological' argument for learner autonomy rests on the individual's 'right to be free to exercise his or her own choices, in learning as in other areas, and not become a victim (even an unwitting one) of choices made by social institutions'. This is, essentially, an argument that learning is not a preparation for life, but a part of life; learner autonomy is, thus, placed under the same umbrella that protects personal autonomy. In the field of education, Boud (1988: 20) also argues that, if autonomy is no more than 'an abstract concept divorced from any particular situation, it can be an ideal to which we can aspire, but it is not something that we realistically expect to emerge from any given course'. According to this argument, schools do not foster personal autonomy by inculcating knowledge, abilities and values, but by offering students authentic experiences of autonomy in the teaching and learning process. From the perspective of a philosophy of personal autonomy, therefore, it is difficult to see how autonomy in learning is legitimately constrained at all.

Nevertheless, this is a difficult principle for teachers to accept, largely because it runs counter to the idea that the 'teacher' function includes deciding content and methods of learning, or more generally, that a 'teacher' is a person who 'knows best' in regard to student learning. It also appears to be a difficult principle within the philosophy of autonomy itself, where constraints on behavioural autonomy are often legitimized by considerations of 'paternalism'. Young (1986: 76), for example, constructs such an argument from a distinction between 'occurrent' autonomy (autonomous behaviour in a particular situation) and 'dispositional' autonomy (autonomy over the course of a person's life). If personal autonomy involves a struggle to author or shape one's own life, dispositional autonomy clearly has priority over occurrent autonomy, and to ensure dispositional autonomy, 'strong paternalist interventions will sometimes be needed'. In the philosophical literature, the principle of paternalism has not, in fact, been extended to arguments over autonomy in learning. Instead, there is an assumption that paternalism is legitimate only in situations where a person's normal faculties of judgement are impaired. The occurrent autonomy of persons who are contemplating suicide or self-harm, for example, is

legitimately constrained by the potential harm to their dispositional autonomy. It is also assumed that they will be grateful for having been constrained once the desire for suicide or self-harm has passed. We can readily see, however, how this principle can be extended to 'learners', who are often deemed to lack sufficient knowledge to decide what will serve the longer-term development of their personal autonomy and what will hinder it. Paternalism also places a slippery slope in front of the principle of respect for learner autonomy, because the social roles of 'teacher' and 'learner' entail an assumption that teachers are, by definition, authorized to make these decisions on behalf of learners. The slope gets slipperier when the learners in question are cast in the roles of 'children' or 'adolescents'.

There is, however, an argument against paternalism in school settings, which has been advanced most cogently by the philosopher Robert Lindley (1986: 135). In brief, Lindley argues that the various systems of regulation involved in schooling place severe constraints on children's behavioural autonomy. For Lindley, however, the relative status of children and adults should be determined by social expectations of their responsibilities as citizens. Because children in the United Kingdom are held legally responsible for their own actions from the age of ten, he argues, children above this age are, like adults, 'persons' whose autonomy deserves respect. While this does not negate the possibility of legitimate paternalistic constraints, their legitimacy would need to be judged according to whether or not they promote the children's personal autonomy in the longer term. In most cases, Lindley argues, schools fail this test, for 'an educational system which was geared to promote widespread autonomy amongst its pupils would provide an environment which stimulated critical self-awareness, a desire to question received wisdom, and self-directedness; and most schools are unable to provide this' (136). We might agree, therefore, that there would be something wrong with a society of autonomous individuals who stood idly by while its members caused harm to themselves. But a more general application of the principle of paternalistic constraints in 'teacher'- 'learner' relations would only seem justified in the unlikely event that these constraints fostered the long-term personal autonomy that many educational systems avow.

My answer to Q2, therefore, would be that the principle of respect and support for personal autonomy does, in fact, imply respect for autonomy in learning. Personal autonomy does not only entail learning. It also entails autonomy *in the process of learning*. For this reason, there are no general grounds within the philosophy of autonomy for teachers to constrain the autonomy of their students. This is not to say, of course, that there are no grounds whatsoever, because autonomy may not be the only consideration to be taken into account. Even where they are explicitly committed to the goal of personal autonomy, educational institutions often constrain the behavioural autonomy that would best lead their students towards this goal. These constraints do not occur in the interests of the students' personal autonomy, but as a consequence of conflicting priorities (very often the practical need to deal with students *en masse* rather than as individuals). From the teachers' perspective, I would argue, the legitimacy of constraints on learner autonomy is very often a matter

of balancing the consequences of these constraints against the value against the value of respect for autonomy.

From autonomy in learning to autonomy in language learning

Q3. Does autonomy in language learning imply that learners should decide what they learn, or can autonomy legitimately be restricted to how, when and where they learn?

In educational institutions, constraints on autonomy are chiefly of two kinds: those concerned with student behaviour and discipline (encoded in rules, regulations and fixed routines) and those that are more directly concerned with teaching and learning. The former are essentially concerned with the personal autonomy of the students within the everyday life of the institution, while the latter are more directly concerned with autonomy in learning. Focusing on the latter, we might say that designing pedagogies for learner autonomy is largely a question of creating situations in which students are able to some control over when, where, with whom, how, what and why they are learning. A further useful distinction can be made between constraints related to learning methodology (the when, where, with whom, and how of learning) and constraints related to learning content (what and why). Q3 arises from an assumption that, in most educational settings, constraints on student control of learning content are less easily relaxed than constraints on control over learning methodologies. The question is, essentially, whether learner autonomy *without* control over the content of learning is really autonomy at all.

This question is very often of vital practical importance to teachers, who find themselves in the position where the students are required to learn some predefined content (because, for example, it is prescribed in a syllabus or tested in an examination set by a higher authority), but there is some flexibility in regard to the teaching and learning methodologies by which this is achieved. It is at the heart of recent discussions of 'strong' and 'weak' pedagogies for autonomy (Smith, 2003), in which the difference between strong and weak often hinges on whether or not students make decisions about *what* they learn, based on their understanding of *why* they are learning a particular language. Littlewood's (1999: 75) distinction between 'proactive' and 'reactive' autonomy also boils down to the question of whether or not the students set up their own directions for learning (proactive) or organize their resources autonomously once the direction has been set by others (reactive). Ribé's (2003: 15) distinction between 'convergence' and 'divergence' models of autonomy, meanwhile, rests on the question of whether there is a movement towards shared, other-directed curriculum goals (convergence) or towards more open curriculum goals, in which there is 'a wide range of choices around the process affecting almost all levels of control, management and strategic decisions' (divergence). Possibilities for student control over learning content are, in this sense, a matter of balancing the value of the students all learning the same thing against the value individual students learning something that is unique to themselves.

Posed in this way, the possibilities for student control over learning content cannot be separated from the nature of the subject matter. In the case of driving instruction, for example, there are very good reasons why all students should learn the same things about driving a vehicle. Our answer to Q3, in other words, depends on how important it is that learners of a particular language learn the same things. There are clearly reasons for the standardization of foreign language teaching content that have little to do with the nature of language learning itself, such as the need to manage learning in large classes or the need to compare learners' performances for the purpose of qualification. From the perspective of autonomy, however, we need only be concerned with whether or not foreign language competence consists in the acquisition of a defined body of knowledge and skills. This question is, at least in part, philosophical in nature and concerns the contribution that language learning, as a *specific kind of learning*, may make towards the development of personal autonomy in a multilingual world.

As a first step in the argument, I want to recall Raz's (1986: 83) observation that personal autonomy is 'socially defined in that the goals, preferences, and values of individuals, in sum the meanings of individual activities, are derived from the shared social matrix'. As a second step, I want to relate this idea of personal autonomy developing within a social context that lends it specific meanings to views of language acquisition that emphasize the role of language in socialization. Ochs (2002: 106) sums up the essence of these views in her comment that, 'language socialization is rooted in the notion that language acquisition is part of a much larger process of becoming a person in society'. The third step is to suggest that, if becoming 'a person in society' involves personal autonomy, the acquisition of personal autonomy must also be mediated by language and language learning. Language learning is, in other words, a specific kind of learning in the sense that it is central to socialization and personal growth. If it is accepted, moreover, that the experience of autonomy is an important ingredient in learning to be autonomous, this must be especially so in regard to autonomy in *language* learning. To the extent that learning is language-mediated, autonomy in learning entails autonomy in language learning in the same way that the development of personal autonomy entails autonomy in learning.

Arguably, this argument holds true of first language acquisition and primary socialization, but has less force in relation to foreign language learning, which often has less impact on the learner as a person in society. The counter-argument to this would be that language learning always has an impact on the learner's identity and that foreign language learning has the particular effect of situating learners in wider, multilingual worlds, to which they would otherwise lack access. This is, however, partly a matter of how foreign language learning is conceptualized by educational institutions, teachers and learners themselves. In institutionalized education, languages are often *reduced to* decontextualized bodies of knowledge and skills and taught in ways that *minimize* impact on the learners' identities. As the outcome of a European project on autonomy in language teaching and learning, Jiménez Raya, Lamb, and Vieira (2007: 1) define autonomy in language learning as 'the competence to develop as a self-

determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation'. Here, there is a very definite vision of the kind of person in society that the autonomous foreign language learner might become. In order to become 'self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware' foreign language users, however, it is important that learners become capable of using foreign languages as a means of *self-expression*. As Macaro (2008: 59-60), puts it,

'Having a choice in their own language learning means the language learner or user taking control not only of the language being learnt, but also of the goal and purpose of that learning.... Autonomy resides in being able to say what you want to say rather than producing the language of others...'

From this perspective, autonomy in language learning implies learners setting their own directions for learning that will lead to divergent outcomes, because the ultimate importance of foreign language learning is not the acquisition of a shared body of knowledge, but the ability to say what one wants to say in more than one language.

Returning to Q3, I would argue that autonomy in language learning does imply that learners should make decisions about the content of their learning. Up to a certain point, learning a foreign language may, indeed, involve acquiring a defined body of knowledge (of the most frequent words and basic phonological and grammatical structures, for example), but beyond this point there is a great deal of variation in what needs to be learned. Beyond this point, the content of language learning is related to the 'why' of language learning: what the learner wants to do with the language, or more fundamentally, who the learner wants to become as a user of it. A point to bear in mind, however, is that this is not necessarily a pre-condition for learning a foreign language. Rather, it is a pre-condition for connecting autonomy in language learning to personal autonomy. Making the languages that we learn 'our own' depends on both authenticity of purpose and control over the content of learning and is part and parcel of becoming personally autonomous in a multilingual world.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper has been to make connections between three aspects of autonomy: autonomy in language learning, autonomy in learning, and autonomy in life. My argument is that a meaningful approach to autonomy in language learning should be situated within broader theories of autonomy in learning and the philosophy of personal autonomy. In order to do this, we need to think about the sense in which personal autonomy entails learner autonomy and, in turn, the sense in which learner autonomy entails language learner autonomy. Personal autonomy entails learner autonomy, because the process of learning to be autonomous must itself involve autonomy. Learner autonomy entails language learner autonomy, because learning is largely a matter of language-mediated socialization and because personal autonomy itself entails self-expression and autonomy in language use. This is not say, of course, that personal autonomy depends on knowledge of more than one language. Yet

in a multilingual world in which foreign language competencies often have a significant impact on personal and social lives, there is a clear link between autonomy in language learning and personal autonomy for individuals who engage in language learning.

I have also placed the philosophical arguments in the context of more practical issues, by arguing for the legitimacy of language teachers' concerns with personal autonomy, the illegitimacy of constraints on students' autonomy within educational institutions, and the importance of control over the content of language learning in pedagogies for autonomy. Readers may well remain unconvinced by these arguments, which tend towards what have been described as 'strong' versions of pedagogy for autonomy. The reason for this, perhaps, is that in order to argue from philosophical grounds, we often need to temporarily suspend judgement on practical matters. By doing so, we gain a clearer picture of what follows from the philosophy of autonomy itself and what follows from other, valid or invalid concerns. The validity of these concerns needs to be evaluated separately, and they can then be weighed against the value of autonomy. In many situations, it will be legitimate to adopt a 'weak' version of pedagogy for autonomy: to prioritize language teaching goals over the development of personal autonomy, to constrain the learners' autonomy in certain ways, and to prioritize control of methodologies over control of content. The legitimacy of such an approach cannot, however, be grounded in the philosophy of autonomy itself, but needs to be based on careful consideration of the balance between the application of this philosophy and other, perhaps equally pressing, concerns.

References

- Benson, P. 2011. *Teaching and researching autonomy*. Second edition. London: Pearson Education.
- Boud, D. 1988. Moving towards autonomy. In: D. Boud (éd.), *Developing student autonomy in learning*. Second edition. London: Kogan Page.
- Crabbe, D. 1993. « Fostering autonomy from within the classroom: the teacher's responsibility ». *System*, no 21 (4), 443-452.
- Jiménez Raya, M. et al., 2007. *Pedagogy for autonomy in language education in Europe: Towards a framework for learner and teacher development*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Lindley, R. 1986. *Autonomy*. London: Macmillan.
- Littlewood, W. T. 1999. « Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts ». *Applied Linguistics*, no 20 (1), 71-94.
- Macaro, E. 2008. *Learning strategies in foreign and second language classrooms*. London: Continuum.
- Ochs, E. 2002. Become a speaker of culture. In: C. Kramsch (éd.) *Language acquisition and socialization: Ecological perspectives*. London: Continuum.
- Raz, J. 1986. *The morality of freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Ribé, R. 2003. *Tramas* in the foreign language classroom: autopoietic networks for learner growth. In: D. Little, et al. (éds.). *Learner autonomy in foreign language classrooms: teacher, learner, curriculum and assessment*. Dublin: Authentik.

Smith, R. C. 2003. Pedagogy for autonomy as (becoming-) appropriate methodology. In: D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (éds.). *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Young, R. 1986. *Personal autonomy: Beyond negative and positive liberty*. London: Croom Helm.