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Department of English Studies, Faculty of Pedagogy and Fine Arts, Adam Mickiewicz University, Kalisz
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Book Reviews

Social dimensions of autonomy in language learning

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Garold Murray

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"There is only one way to learn," the alchemist answered, "it's through action. Everything you need to know you have learned through your journey . . ." (Coehlo, 2006, p. 120). This quote, taken from the end of the shepherd boy's journey, reflects the nature of learning and portrays the spirit of *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning.* Just as the shepherd boy in *The Alchemist* learns to realize his dreams both on his own strength and through dependence on others, Garold Murray and the other contributors illustrate the journey of autonomy in language learning within the interdependence-independence interplay.

In this volume, the contributors draw attention to the fact that in the journey towards understanding and mastery, language learning neither occurs at one individual moment (O'Leary, Chapter 2) nor in one specific location, such as in self-access centers (Murray, Chapter 5 and Palfreyman, Chapter 10), but rather encompasses multiple places, people and resources. The journey also involves an affective response towards the language and the learning environment. This holistic, affective, transformative journey from novice to experienced

language learner is complex, dynamic and unique to each individual, and it is this complexity that this collection captures. Using socially oriented theoretical perspectives, such as ecological, complexity, social constructivist and sociocultural frameworks, the studies contained in this volume bring together theory, research and practice in the field of autonomy in language learning, highlighting its socially situated nature.

The aim of *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning* is to shed light on how learner autonomy is socially mediated. Stemming from a symposium with the same name, which took place at the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) 2011 World Congress in Beijing, this collection of papers differs from previous research on autonomy in that it challenges the idea of autonomy being a construct primarily characterized by a set of capacities pertaining to the individual. These papers shift the view from independence of learners to their interdependence with social contexts and other individuals. The book is organized into three distinct sections, each addressing a different dimension of language learner autonomy: the emotional, the spatial, and the political. At first, I was unsure how language learner autonomy could be encapsulated by such categories; however, the theme of autonomy as a socially mediated construct weaves very clearly throughout the diverse studies within these three subdivisions.

The seminal definition of autonomy as "taking charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3) provides the foundation for *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning*; however, the various researchers in this collection have then added three further important nuances to this definition. Firstly, Benson (2001, p. 87) suggests that personal control over the cognitive processes may be "the most fundamental level" in measuring and/or assessing autonomy because it precedes observable learning management behavior. He identifies three psychological categories of autonomy, namely: attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge. In Chapter 2, O'Leary modifies Benson's definition further in recognition of the fact that there must also be a willingness from the learner to take responsibility for the emotional aspects of the learning process (Ushioda, 1996). Secondly, the collection draws attention to the fact that autonomy emerges from the individual's interaction with other components of the environment (Little, 2001). However, this not only refers to environmental factors and affordances but also to other people: "Because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by our dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence" (in the words of Little, as cited by Murray in the introduction). In this way, autonomy can be thought of as forming a complex system; autonomy emerges from the complex interaction of these multiple components. The contributions argue that autonomy fundamentally exists symbioti-

cally with social interaction. Thirdly, Paiva in Chapter 13 adds layers to the metaphorical onion of autonomy by explaining that a learner is not only in charge of their own learning but rather continues to reevaluate his/her own motivation, abilities, beliefs, as well as the learning surroundings, and proceeds accordingly. Paiva (2006) explains that autonomy is

> a complex socio-cognitive system, subject to internal and external constraints, which manifests itself in different degrees of independence and control of one's learning process. It involves capacities, abilities, attitudes, willingness, decision-making, choices, planning, actions and assessment either as a language learner or as a communicator inside or outside of the classroom. As a complex system it is dynamic, chaotic, unpredictable, non-linear, open, self-organizing, and sensitive to initial conditions and feedback. (pp. 88-89)

In the section addressing the emotional dimension of autonomy, there are three chapters which together show the need for the recognition of emotions, specifically empathy and trust, within language learning. O'Leary focuses on learners' construction of learning, how they view their role in the process and their capacity to control their own learning at the university level (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3, Lewis presents autonomy as a set of competencies regarding human sociality, including empathy, altruism and respect for other language learners, exemplified by messages posted in an online language course. Finally, Yashima analyzes self-determination theory in respect to intrinsic motivation and joy derived from speaking the foreign language (Chapter 4). In their own ways, each chapter demonstrates the roles of freedom and choice in language learning autonomy.

In the section addressing the spatial dimension of autonomy, there are four chapters which together show the roles of learning spaces, whether physical or virtual, as the researchers acknowledge that language learning takes place within metaphorical, virtual, as well as physical spaces. Communities of practice can form and take place online, through extracurricular programs, or within the classroom itself. Murray, Fujishima and Uzuka draw light to learning experiences within a social learning space dedicated to language learning (Chapter 5). Both Chik and Breidback (Chapter 6) and Murphy (Chapter 7) investigate the cross-cultural boundaries of virtual spaces and how autonomous learning involves both choosing to participate and not to participate in given tasks. Mideros and Carter exemplify the usage of a virtual space to enhance the time spent within the classical physical classroom with regards to listening comprehension (Chapter 8).

In the section addressing the political dimension of autonomy, there are four chapters which together provide the initial framework for interpreting language learning experiences, dealing with nonlinear, dynamic systems, which focus on dynamicity, connection, change, and adaptation. As the circumstances in

which the language learner finds him/herself are constantly changing, they can forever be reinterpreted. Sade notes that the more interaction of multiple elements, the more complexity, resulting in the emergence of new patterns and the collection being much more than the sum of its parts (Chapter 9). Learners should be able to speak as themselves, especially when teachers recognize their diversity and unique personal histories. Palfreyman acknowledges that the discursive resources, how attitudes and beliefs are proliferated within a community, either promote or demote the importance of language learning within a particular group (Chapter 10), which congruently affects the language learner's choices and opinions about learning progression. In the next chapter, Zaragoza illustrates how socioeconomic status also plays a key role in language learning and the value placed upon this learning (Chapter 11), which can in turn influence individual learning goals. The way in which one views one's future self and how the language may be utilized directly influences the motivation and beliefs of the language learner, along with his/her perceived ability to direct his/her own learning. One area of further research is explored by Barfield, who considers the role of involvement in local professional development and collaborative teaching communities and how the dominant knowledge base; that is publishing in English, having international researchers and positioning towards a global readership; potentially limit the multi-vocality and voice of others (Chapter 12). This topic of written democracy directly relates to the publication of volumes such as *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning* since many teacher-researchers fear that they have nothing pertinent to contribute. It is, however, through narrative approaches and positioning themselves as a teacher first and a theorist second (Nix, Barfield, Irie, & Stewart, 2011) that they can give voice to what they are observing first-hand in the classroom. The principles of social equality apply both to the autonomous language learner and to the language researcher.

This volume is suited for tertiary-level courses in autonomy, language teaching and language acquisition, as well as for researchers and practitioners interested in these fields. The book has also been designed to give voice to those who are in the field of teaching and who desire to enable students to envision their future L2 selves, in order that they may directly influence their own learning process. My impression of this volume is that it is very practical for both researchers as well as teaching professionals who are interested in enabling students to set their own goals and implement them. I personally enjoyed reading the volume for three particular reasons. First, I enjoyed reading what teacher-researchers write about their own teaching experiences through narratives, case studies and action research, and about how they relate what they are doing in the classroom to the social mediation of autonomy. Second, this volume pro-

vides several methods which, as a teacher, I can employ to meet my goal of encouraging language learning and increasing the autonomy of my language learners so that they can recognize the opportunities (affordances) they have to learn and utilize the language to imagine their future L2 selves using this language. Third, the book enabled me, as a researcher, to reflect on how autonomy is conceptualized in theoretical terms ensuring a situated, complex and dynamic view of the construct, which in turn caused me to think more deeply about the diversity of approaches to researching autonomy in this light, as reflected by the multiple theoretical viewpoints employed in this volume.

I would highly recommend this collection. It offers a rich overarching history of language learner autonomy and presents a plethora of original and diverse research on the construct from new, fresh perspectives. One is invited along on the journey to uncover socially mediated autonomy, moving from independence to interdependence. In *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning*, researchers unveil the emotional, spatial and political dimensions, recognizing that language learning, and autonomy, are not bound to a specific location or space and are fundamentally social undertakings.

Reviewed by
Michelle K. Gilluly
University of Graz, Austria
michelle.gilluly@gmail.com

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