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## Chapter 1

### Space, place and autonomy in language learning: An introduction

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Space and place are like the air we breathe; they form such an integral part of our daily experience that we rarely give the concepts any thought. We are in them, we are a part of them. Notions of space and place are ubiquitous. This is evident in the language we use: common expressions, such as ‘to take place’ (events and activities are linked to place); ‘to make a place for yourself’ (we yearn for a sense of belonging); ‘not to be able to place someone’ (place is associated with memory and cognition); ‘to know your place’ or, on occasion, if you do not, ‘to be put in your place’ (place is tied to our identity and sense of self). Sometimes we feel ‘out of place’. How we feel in a place is important to our sense of wellbeing. Places can invoke strong emotional reactions. We exist in and live our lives moving through space and place. Perhaps, ironically, it is due to the pervasive nature of these constructs that they have been largely overlooked in the field of applied linguistics – until recently.

In language education for many years the prime focus of research has been on a particular kind of place, the classroom. In the latter part of the last century, this focus expanded to include spaces outside the classroom, yet still in institutional settings, for example, the self-access centre. Concomitantly, with the development of self-access language learning came an interest in learner autonomy, learners who took responsibility for their learning and manifested this responsibility in the form of action aimed at meeting their learning goals. Gradually, in the field of language

education, 'context' as a construct gained importance. The idea became prevalent that context needed to be taken into consideration when studying language learners and learning. Meanwhile, outside of language education, there was a growing interest in spaces in relation to learning. Learning commons started to be the focal points of libraries, and social learning spaces – places for people to gather and work and learn together – began to appear on university campuses. Educators, observing and documenting this phenomenon, came to view space not only as an agent, in and of itself, but as a vehicle for change in pedagogical practice (Oblinger 2006).

In this book, the contributors explore space as an agent in relation to language learning. Representing a wide range of linguistically and culturally diverse learning contexts, these researchers draw on a number of theoretical approaches as they explore various aspects of this general theme. Central to this exploration are theories from the field of human geography, which have informed our general understanding of how spaces are transformed into places, in this case, places for language learning. Scholars in the field of human geography view places as social constructions (Cresswell 2004; Harvey 1996; Massey 2005). Places are created through action, by people doing things in a particular space (Cresswell 2004). By talking about this space as a setting in which these actions are performed, it becomes identified and defined as a place where certain activities are carried out. Carter, Donald and Squires (1993: ix) write that 'place is space to which meaning has been ascribed.' Through our actions and discourses we ascribe meaning to a space and transform it into a place. The product of everyday practices and discourses, places are dynamic and ever-changing. As we participate in these processes, we appropriate spaces, embody them, impose our identities on them and at the same time have our identities shaped by the places we inhabit and the practices we engage in. In this collection of papers, the contributors

explore current thinking on space and place in relation to learner and teacher autonomy and focus on the implications for language learning both in and beyond institutional settings. The questions these researchers examine revolve around the processes by which learners transform physical, virtual and metaphorical spaces into places for learning.

The researchers, whose studies appear in this collection, see autonomy as playing a vital role in the processes by which spaces are transformed into places for learning. Since it was introduced into the field of language education in the late 1970s, autonomy itself has been moving across time and space (see Lamb 2015). Defined in the early days as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec 1981: 3), the construct later came to be generally viewed as the ‘the capacity to take control of one’s learning’ (Benson 2011: 58). With the advance of sociocultural and ecological approaches, autonomy has also been recognized as a social construction. For example, van Lier (2004: 8), writing from both a sociocultural and an ecological perspective, defines autonomy as ‘having the authorship of one’s actions, having the voice that speaks one’s words, and being emotionally connected to one’s actions and speech (Damasio, 2003), within one’s community of practice (Wenger, 1998)’. Furthermore, he saw autonomy as being ‘dialogical in Bakhtin’s sense (1981): socially produced, but appropriated and made one’s own’ (van Lier, 2004: 4). Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2007: 1) extend the definition to emphasize the political dimension and give the area of enquiry a social consciousness and even a mission, when they define autonomy as a ‘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’. Within these definitions we find facets of autonomy that are examined in

this volume: goal-oriented action, emotions, community, criticality, empowerment, and change. Key questions to be asked of this collection of papers include: in what ways might an exploration of space and place inform our understanding of autonomy; and, conversely, how might an expanded view of autonomy provide insights into the role of space and place in language learning.

### **The structure of the book**

Ordering this linguistically, culturally and contextually diverse collection of papers into some sort of coherent whole to present in the form of a book has been a revealing academic exercise. At first, all of the chapters appeared to examine either physical, virtual or metaphorical spaces. These concepts could have served as a possible means of categorizing the papers into sections for the book. However, on closer inspection, one thing that becomes evident from these studies is that learning places can be polymorphous, sometimes being hybrids of physical, virtual and/or metaphorical spaces. Another perhaps more obvious classification might have been in-class and out-of-class learning. But then, most of the papers are either situated in out-of-class settings or blended learning contexts. Furthermore, Hafner and Miller's (Chapter 11) paper, for example, which focuses on the design of an English course for science students, blurs the in-class/out-of-class dichotomy to the extent that one wonders how helpful this distinction might be as language educators look to the future. On the other hand, Chik (Chapter 4) notes in her study, which on one level portrays learners creating virtual learning places beyond the classroom, that the learners initially eked out spaces that recreated classroom conditions. Looking at Chik's study from another perspective, the participants could be viewed as moving across the urban landscape

of Hong Kong drawing on the affordances they saw available in order to create their personal learning niche. This metaphor of movement across a landscape seemed to encapsulate the challenge we were facing as editors. The learning being depicted in this collection of enquiries was moving across various spaces and occurring on multiple levels and time scales. Concluding that any categorization of the chapters would, therefore, be provisional and that any of the papers might conceivably fit into more than one category, we settled on labels we hoped would be the least confining and grouped the chapters into the following four sections: urban spaces, teacher education spaces, classroom spaces and beyond, and institutional spaces.

#### Part 1: Urban spaces

The first section explores space, place and autonomy across the broad expanse of urban landscapes. Lamb and Vodicka (Chapter 2) consider the plight of minority languages in multilingual urban contexts in the UK. Rather than see these languages marginalized, they draw on a range of disciplines to highlight collectively autonomous everyday public practices engaged in by local communities that ensure that their languages are learnt and maintained; the authors argue that these may be the roots of a broader political and educational engagement that serves to create ‘interlingual shared spaces’, in which these languages and their speakers would be visible and valued to the benefit of everyone. White and Bown (Chapter 3) examine the role of emotions in the transformation of both urban and virtual spaces into places for learning. They do this by drawing on data from two studies: one investigates how learners in a study abroad context in Russia discover places for learning in a foreign city; and the other explores the learning spaces created through telecollaboration by students learning German and English in urban centres

located halfway around the world from each other in New Zealand and Germany respectively. In her study, Chik (Chapter 4) focuses on the role of creativity as she documents how three foreign language learners craft learning spaces in out-of-class contexts. The only stipulation guiding their participation in her study was that the materials they used had to be freely available to the general public in their urban area, Hong Kong. The next enquiry is set in a city in Turkey where Balcikanli (Chapter 5) explores the affordances for language learning in a social learning space, a café where English learners meet for an evening twice each month. In the last study in this section, Wilton and Ludwig (Chapter 6) experiment with linguistic landscapes – language found in public places – as a pedagogical tool to enhance teacher education students’ awareness of language use in multilingual urban spaces and to develop learner autonomy.

## Part 2: Teacher education spaces

In this section, attention shifts more directly to teacher education programmes. Two central themes highlighted in these papers are change and learner development. Jiménez Raya and Vieira (Chapter 7) propose using case pedagogy in order to create an *interspace* designed to bridge the gap that currently exists between actual teaching practices and the ideals of academia. In their study, set in a postgraduate teacher education programme in Portugal, teachers generate and analyse cases based on narratives, consolidating their professional experience and knowledge and developing their personal theories. This is followed by a study aiming to promote change in language education in Finland by giving students in a teacher education programme first-hand experience in the development and use of technology-based materials. Reporting on this work, Kuure (Chapter 8) examines the *attention spaces* the learners move between as they

work in teams to develop an online learning project for elementary school children. The last paper in this section (Carter Chapter 9), a narrative inquiry originating in a teacher education course in Trinidad, encompasses a broad expanse of time and space. This autobiographical account documents the language learning life history of a Japanese woman married to a diplomat as she moves across various geographical and metaphorical learning spaces.

### Part 3: Classroom spaces and beyond

The studies reported in this section focus on the classroom and, in one case, illustrate how the distinction between in-class and out-of-class can become blurred as classroom spaces blend with places beyond. Kocapete (Chapter 10) documents how students in a classroom in the United Arab Emirates use humour to create spaces in which their voices can be heard and they can take ownership of their learning. An interesting feature of this study is that, although the students transformed the learning space into a place different from what the teacher intended, she was nonetheless able to turn their interventions into productive teaching-learning moments. In a study exploring a project-based course in English for science at a university in Hong Kong, Hafner and Miller (Chapter 11) examine the students' various collaboratively constructed learning spaces and reflect on factors course designers should consider in order to optimize their creation. Hafner and Miller note that features which facilitated collaboration enabled the students to discover learning spaces the teachers could not have foreseen when designing the course. The final study in this section takes place in a classroom in a juvenile detention centre in Brazil. In this paper, Reis (Chapter 12) examines how the participants take turns to construct discursive spaces that engender the stagnation of learning opportunities. The environment they create is in sharp



contrast to the one portrayed in the chapter at the beginning of this section in which the students' interventions serve as the basis for productive learning opportunities.

#### Part 4: Institutional spaces

The studies in this final section look at a broad spectrum of learning spaces in institutional environments, ranging from reconceptualised classrooms to venues for extracurricular activities. To begin, Hobbs and Dofs (Chapter 13) present the case of two New Zealand institutions that are rethinking the use of classroom spaces and converting them into multipurpose areas. They argue that, in the current climate of rapid pedagogical modernisation and conversion to digital course delivery, self-access learning centres take on added importance as places where students can receive both pedagogical and emotional support as well as make a place for themselves for study and social purposes. The next paper, which focuses on undergraduate teacher education students at a university in Brazil, describes how a self-access centre supports language learning by offering a variety of extracurricular activities which immerse the learners in the target language. Magno e Silva (Chapter 14) explains that the ultimate aim of this program is to provide would-be teachers with learning experiences that will empower them to offer their future students similar learning opportunities. The last paper in this section takes readers to a large national university in Japan where Murray, Fujishima and Uzuka (Chapter 15) examine the issue of how learners, often linguistically challenged, might gain entry into social spaces – and the social groups that inhabit them – and transform these spaces into places where they can learn.

#### Conclusion

In the concluding chapter, we return to the central theme of the book, look at the collection as a whole, and ask what it can tell us about space, place and autonomy in language learning.

We address this question by discussing the results of a thematic analysis of the previous chapters with a view to synthesizing how the insights they provide might advance theory development, inform practice, and suggest areas for future investigation. Given that the exploration of space, place and autonomy represents a new line of inquiry, we also examine the issue of research methodologies suitable for studies in this area. We reflect on recurrent themes that the authors discuss, but we also tease out trends, which – although they might not have been pursued in these chapters – point us in the direction of roads not yet taken. In this final chapter, the conclusions we draw and the paths we suggest are without a doubt influenced by our own theoretical leanings, research interests and experience as language educators; therefore, we now invite you to explore these papers yourselves and to see where they might lead you in your thinking and practice.

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