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Language Learner Autonomy in Practice: Possibilities in a Foreign Language Situation

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ABSTRACT

In this article the concept of *learner autonomy* is applied to the foreign language classroom although some ideas might also be useful within a second language context. It begins by approaching the different problems that a foreign language context entails. It then goes on to put forward the rationale which justifies David Little's construct of developmental and experiential learning (*Learner Autonomy*) as the result of both interactional and inferential input. The latter is redefined here on the basis of a pragmatic theory: Relevance Theory, first proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986. Finally, some hints aiming to foster learner autonomy inside and outside the classroom are reported after an experience with university students of English in Spain.[1]

Learner autonomy, as a new field of study, has gradually come into existence since the 1970s as a consequence of a new shift in interest in studies on language learning: learners have gradually been viewed as producers of language and less as learners of a system imposed on them by society. Following Holec (*Autonomy in Foreign*) it may be further assumed that this shift had its origin in a changing attitude towards the relationship between the individual and society: individuals have come to be seen more and more as *producers* rather than *products* of society. Other terms are frequently used to make reference to the autonomy of the language learner: self-management, autogestion, self-learning, autodidaxy, self-directed learning, learning on an autonomous basis, individualisation, participation or syllabus negotiation, self-instruction, self-access learning, resource-based learning, learning consciousness, learner-centredness, learner independence, learning how to learn, co-operative teaching and learning, independent language learning, learner training, or, distance learning. Most of them are frequently found in current publications concerning second/foreign language development.[2]

1. On the need to implement learner autonomy dynamics in the foreign language classroom

Learner autonomy has always been associated with a fundamental construct, *responsibility*, in the general sense proposed by Knowles (*The Modern Practice*) of responsibility to take decisions, to face their consequences, and to manage one's life. Such responsibility is not an inborn characteristic of human beings but the result of a process related to growth and personal life experience. In the same way, and according to Little ("Learner autonomy"), autonomy is viewed as an ability or capacity acquired and developed naturally as the result of developmental and experiential learning and which, following Gail Ellis and Barbara Sinclair (*Learning to Learn*), requires the use of different strategies to allow for its development.

Quite apart from questions of approach or methodology, our experience with university students of English and German as a foreign language has revealed a crucial need to implement learner autonomy in the course. This might be due to:

(a) Most learners have had an academic contact with a foreign language for about seven or eight years (primary and secondary education) and have become accustomed to being taught the language rather than being taught how to learn it.

(b) As a consequence of (a), knowledge has always been presented to them as an external matter which had not only to be accepted, but also made theirs (despite their real needs and demands) instead of being previously tried out and investigated.

(c) Trying out and investigating means becoming engaged in the learning process, but the experience resulting from (a) reports a group of learners who are not aware of themselves as language learners and are consequently unwilling to take on responsibilities.

(d) While, generally speaking, learners are capable of, and used to, relating subjects like mathematics or history to their lives outside the classroom, they seem unable to do so with the foreign language: deprived of the opportunity to make use of it in their daily lives, the foreign language classroom is usually regarded as a world to itself, something apart from everyday experience.

(e) It is to be observed that the instrumental motivation which characterises this type of learner enhances "the desire to remove the barriers between learning and living" (Little *Learner Autonomy* 8), especially at university level, where students are more likely to have an awareness of the demands that their future professional world will place upon them.

(f) The reduction in the time now assigned to foreign language learning subjects within the new university curricula helps once again to emphasize that learners have to be prepared in such a way as to enable them to develop their learning skills and to continue learning on their own after leaving the language course.

These six circumstances underline the fact that *a change of attitude* on the learners' part must precede and prepare the way for autonomous language learning, since learners will only learn the language when they are ready to do so (Larsen-Freeman "Second language acquisition"). In this sense, it seems advisable that "adults be equipped with the skills necessary to continue learning on their own when they leave a formal education experience so that they may be able to adapt and respond to these changes" (Wenden "Conceptual background and utility" 9).

Such a change of attitude should be understood as "a gradual 'deconditioning' process" (Holec *Autonomy in Foreign* 22) as first regards the learners' attitude towards the language, and then towards their language learning processes. Consequently, some classroom activities should aim at fostering language awareness and metacognitive knowledge (or language learning awareness), since learners who lack such approaches "are essentially learners without direction and ability to review their progress, accomplishments, and future learning directions" (O'Malley, *et al. Learning Strategies* 6). But, if language and language learning awareness is thus to be implemented in the classroom, it is first of all the teachers themselves who must possess this kind of awareness. They should understand that their role, as Dam (*Learner Autonomy*) puts it, is to be co-learners and participants in the learning process.

Autonomy may thus be regarded as "a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence" (Allwright "Autonomy in language pedagogy" 2); a process through which this *interdependence* (not, independence) becomes the governing principle of developmental and experiential learning on three fronts: teacher-learner interdependence, pedagogical-communicative interdependence, and cognitive-social interdependence. Teacher-learner relationships imply that teachers have to regard themselves as facilitators for learning rather than language instructors. More precisely, "rather than imparting information, the facilitator is encouraging learning. The student, rather than passively receiving knowledge, is actively involved in the learning process" (McErlain "Learner autonomy" 278). Finally, pedagogical-communicative interdependence means that language learning and language use engage the same psycholinguistic mechanisms, and that, in addition, cognitive-social interdependence implies that acquisition mechanisms are brought to life by social interaction (Little "Learning to learn").

2. Developmental and experiential learning as both interactional and inferential input

Classroom situations are viewed by many practitioners, especially in the foreign language context, as an environment being limited to formal learning which "seems to have little in common with 'real life'" (Little "Learner autonomy" 434) and having almost nothing in common with the outside world —i.e. with natural communication and, hence, with normal processing mechanisms. In his works of 1994 and 1995, this scholar argues that the notion of autonomy is fundamental to developmental and experiential learning, to the extent that formal education will only be successful if "it manages to exploit the interactive mechanisms by which developmental and experiential learning are achieved" ("Learner autonomy" 430). Developmental and experiential learning is then defined as "the product of interactive processes that define our essential interdependence as social beings" (433) and which is "shaped by our developing needs and interests as we interact with the world of which we are members" (434).

This claim for autonomy as the condition for developmental and experiential learning implies the learners' cognitive and social interdependence with their environment. In turn, such interdependence could be understood as a claim for reconsideration of input studies from the standpoint of how input is being processed during active involvement or interaction.

The need to study the possibility of triggering acquisition processes in the foreign language classroom has been an issue of particular interest to some works (Haidl 1990 and 1993; Bocanegra 1995 and 1996) which claim that the main problem of foreign language development lies in the absence of contact with the target language outside the classroom. In order to make up for this absence, and taking up Wolff's assertion in "Zur Bedeutung" that knowing how language is processed means knowing how language is acquired and developed, it is vitally important to study possible ways of approximating classroom input to the way language data are naturally processed outside it. The need to approach this issue becomes even more important if we consider that the way in which input provided by classroom interaction may contribute to language development has been the subject of quite a long list of studies, but none of them has explicitly analysed the special characteristics of oral language processing. Not even studies on inferential processing models have dealt in detail with this question.

Searching for a solution to this, Relevance Theory stands out. This Theory as first proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their publication of 1986 deals with the processes involved in the comprehension of real time utterances. The first point for a basic understanding of its proposals contends that the traditional and still widespread assumption which views communication as a process of encoding and decoding messages, is wrong. According to Sperber and Wilson, decoding is just the first step involved in information processing; apart from this, the hearer has to dissambiguate any ambiguous utterance, assign references to any referential utterance, restore any ellipsed material, and narrow down the interpretation of any over-vague expressions.

In order to bridge the gap between sentence meaning (the semantic features) and utterance interpretation (the pragmatic process), the hearer of an utterance has to be aware of what the speaker intends to say, what the speaker intends to imply, and, finally, what the speaker's intended attitude is to what was said and implied. This model, as Groefsema underlines in her article "Relevance: processing implications", views understanding as a process of interaction in which two parties, speaker and hearer, are involved in the establishment of successful communication. In order to succeed in doing so the hearer obviously needs *context*, or, as Deirdre Wilson puts it "not simply the preceding linguistic text, or the environment in which the utterance takes place, but the set of assumptions brought to bear in arriving at the intended interpretation. These may be drawn from the preceding text, or from observation of the speaker and what is going on in the immediate environment, but they may also be drawn from cultural or scientific knowledge, common-sense assumptions, and more generally, any item of shared or idiosyncratic information that the hearer has access to at the time" ("Relevance and understanding" 341).

The three basic, and rather simple assumptions Relevance Theory puts forward for selection of the adequate context are as follows: First, that every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded. Second, that not all these assumptions occur to the hearer simultaneously; some of them take more effort to think up. The third assumption is that hearers are equipped with a single, very general criterion for evaluating interpretations as they occur to them: the notion of *optimal relevance*, which is meant to spell out what the hearer is looking for in terms of effort and effect. Sperber and Wilson thus claim that newly-presented information is relevant in a context when and only when it achieves contextual effects in that context; therefore, the greater the number of contextual effects, the greater the relevance. The *principle of optimal relevance* is then presented as follows:

> An utterance, on a given occasion, is optimally relevant if and only if:
> (a) it achieves enough contextual effects to be worth the hearer's attention;
> (b) it puts the hearer to no gratuitous processing effort in achieving those effects.
> Thus:
> ... in interpreting an utterance, the hearer starts with a small initial context left over, say, from his processing of the previous utterance: he computes the contextual effects of the utterance in that initial context; if these are not enough to make the utterance worth his attention, he expands the context, obtaining further effects, and repeats the process until he has enough effects to make the utterance optimally relevant in a way the speaker could manifestly have foreseen. At that point, he has an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, and it follows that he should stop; or, at least, he is entitled to go on on his own account, but he is not entitled to assume that the speaker intended to communicate anything more. In other words, all the hearer is entitled to impute as part of the intended interpretation is the *minimal* (i.e. smallest, most accessible) context and contextual effects that would be enough to make the utterance worth his attention. Thus, the interpretation process has an inbuilt stopping place (Wilson "Relevance and understanding" 352-53).

Relevance Theory not only offers a vision of *understanding* that coincides with what average speakers can observe in their own language use, but also solves the discourse analysts' *mutual-knowledge dilemma* by offering a reasonable account for how the human mind, in an amazingly short time, establishes hypotheses on contextual implications of utterances heard in the course of oral interaction.

The extent to which this Principle of Relevance might explain the mental processes inherent to cognitive-social interdependence may be found in the dynamics of the *ostensive-inferential communication* process itself: in the first place, communicators provide evidence of their thoughts by producing a stimulus which makes manifest their intention to inform (ostension) and, immediately after this, addressees recognize such intention and interpret the utterance by means of a process of inferences which works in accordance with their cognitive environment (this is, the set of all the facts they can infer or perceive) and contextual effects.

Both claims are closely related in our opinion to what David Little earlier considered the type of interaction which drives naturalistic language acquisition characterized by two important features: the first one is "the capacity of learners to take initiatives that elicit the input they need and help to sustain the interaction at a level appropriate to their present stage of linguistic development or knowledge," and the second one is "feedback, which guarantees the reciprocity which helps to define what interaction is" ("Learning by talking" 3). Ostensive-inferential communication can be sensed in these words since the very nature of the Principle of Relevance makes the learner (here, addressee) capable of fulfilling the expectations created by the speaker. Ostensive-inferential communication is interdependent because it requires the interaction of those involved —communicators who make mutually manifest their intention to communicate, and addressees who recognize it, presume the relevance inherent to every utterance and process input with reference to a background body of assumptions (i.e. context of utterance).

Other claims on input might also be quoted for consideration in the light of Relevance Theory: "all input that is available to the learner does not have the same impact on him or her" (Brown "Requests for specific" 272), and "comprehensive input is a negotiated rather than an absolute phenomenon" (Ellis *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* 82). Nonetheless, it seems clear that ostensive-inferential communication helps to guess what sort of input is the one which the learner will naturally process: input negotiated in terms of expectations of relevance (i.e. contextual effects and processing cost).

3. Some ideas for introducing autonomous learning inside the classroom

At this stage, the *deconditioning* process put forward by Holec in his *Autonomy in Foreign* can be further developed: since normal inferential processes are only possible if learners are offered the chance to evaluate incoming information from the point of view of the principle of *optimal relevance*, messages must have contextual effects and involve minimal processing effort. Only in this way, will it be possible for them to construct hypotheses as to what the speaker intends to say, what the speaker intends to imply, what the speaker's intended attitude is to what has been said and implied, and what the intended set of contextual assumptions is.

Having regarded to human interdependence the teachers' role as facilitator for learning as well as the need to understand language learning as language use, and this again as social interaction, the assumptions put forward by Relevance Theory could be interpreted as follows: a foreign language classroom has to enable learners to participate in the role of what they are—students—, by interacting in the target language. Moreover, their language awareness and metacognitive knowledge should be directed towards interpreting, in the first place, relevant contextual assumptions, speakers' attitudes, etc.

The *here-and-now principle* as first proposed by Long (*Input, interaction*) interpreted in the light of Relevance Theory, thus reaches double importance: firstly, the principle is vital to allow hypotheses on the basis of contextual effects; secondly, in order to reduce processing effort the principle is absolutely necessary—only if beginning learners can see and experience the immediate consequences of what they hear and say, will they be capable of inferring the right meanings. Learners must, therefore, perceive language use and social interaction as essential when they enter the foreign language classroom; they must find themselves in a situation which compels them to use the new language in order to *survive* in the classroom, and they must be confronted with the consequences of not trying to make up hypotheses on what is going on and fulfil what is expected from them —i.e. they will refrain from interaction in the classroom.

The teacher's role as facilitator does not only lie in providing such an environment, but also in helping learners to find their own ways of getting along in it: if they are expected to accept the challenge posed by the teacher, they must also be given help and be equipped with strategies and procedures for *survival.* This should be part of the *learning contract* or negotiated programme of studies which provides "the student with a precise description of required behaviour in the learning situation" (McErlain "Learner autonomy" 278). To start off with, provide a theoretical introduction in which the importance of the *here-and-now principle* is highlighted as one of the most useful tools for the students to construct hypotheses about the teachers' intentions and what they are talking about. It is also time to emphasize the existence of communication strategies which may enable them to participate actively in the early stages without the need to produce complete and well formed utterances. Moreover, if we consider meanings as being negotiated, teachers should not refrain from their teacher talk along their interactions.

Finally, teachers should go even further. In the light of Relevance Theory, it seems essential that teachers should take into account the different assumptions being made by the learners during classroom interaction. An example might be the following: imagine a teacher of German as a foreign language who asks a Spanish student to pick up her/his coat: *Gib mir deinen Mantel bitte!* ("Give me your coat, please!"). In this case the teacher should take into account that *mantel* (with a stress on the last syllable and not on the first as in German) means *table-cloth* in Spanish and that the student who was asked will probably start by entertaining the (wrong) assumption that the teacher intends to speak about something on the desk. By extralinguistic means like pointing at a coat hanging on the wall —that is, by taking advantage of the *here-and-now principle*, the teacher might help to correct the student's wrong assumptions and re-establish communication in this way.

4. Facilitating autonomous learning outside the classroom: learning how to use the dictionary and the grammar book, an experience with university students of English in Spain

Within an approach aiming at autonomy and which concentrates on oral interaction within the classroom, it is by no means necessary to motivate, make aware and prepare students for self-learning at home (i.e. outside the classroom). On an initial stage, the two fundamental tools which students should be prepared to work with are the dictionary and the grammar book. The way in which learning how to use these tools contributes to self-instruction and later autonomy is clear: "In formal educational contexts learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning —teachers must help them to do so; and they will not necessarily find it easy to reflect critically on the learning process— teachers must first provide them with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practise using them" (Little "Learning as dialogue" 176-77).

Brian Page (*Letting go, talking hold* 48-68), puts forward a series of questions in order to get started in autonomy. One of these is *How do I teach them to use dictionaries?*, but not much is said about how to involve learners in their use. Besides dictionaries, there is some reference to textbooks; grammar books, however, are left aside. According to the needs of a foreign language situation, teachers should be interested in providing learners not only with the appropriate tools, but also with opportunities to put them into practice. In this way, learners should be encouraged to *investigate* the possibilities these tools offer to their own learning processes.

The main problem for most language learners—and arguably for most foreign language learners—is that they do not use the grammar book because they are not aware of its usefulness and regard it as *something to learn* instead of *something which helps them to learn*. This misconception may have its origin in the fact that their previous experience has, in most cases, considered the grammar book as an *end* instead of a *means*. For this reason, learners remain unaware of the fact that a grammar book may solve many of their problems and, even when they are aware of that, they frequently do not know how to handle their own grammar book in search of an answer.

In order to identify problems and provide help, the following *Flowchart on the Use of Dictionary and the Grammar Book* (see appendix) is suggested as a useful and rewarding working routine programme. It should be used as follows:

In the first place, learners should admit that they have a problem and should ask themselves if they are able to find a solution from the moment they become aware of its existence. If they are able to do so, they will know whether they have to use the dictionary or the grammar book. If they are not, they should ask themselves whether the problem is related to pronunciation; if it is, they will have to use a dictionary, and if it is not, they will have to ask themselves whether it is a problem of comprehension. The dictionary will be of help on questions of terminology; if a problem of structures is involved (about formation or collocation) they might be helped by the grammar book as well. If the problem is related neither to pronunciation nor to comprehension, it must be related to the identification of terms or structures. In this case, it is important that learners identify its particular or general morphological function. Once successfully identified, the grammar book provides sufficient information to help to find a solution; however, if learners are not able to arrive at an answer, the dictionary might be of some help in starting the search and tracing a clue which will probably later will make learners turn back to the grammar book.

Basically, this flowchart assumes that, if learners are able to answer *yes* to (a) *Am I able to find a solution to my problem at once?*, they will be able to use their grammar book successfully. If, on the contrary, they do not have an answer to question (a), they should go on to ask themselves (b) *What is my problem then?*, and follow the appropriate steps on the Flowchart presented.

This Chart could be a profitable resource for classroom work until learners feel confident about this working routine and, particularly, about the use of the dictionary and the grammar book. In this way, activities can be designed so that learners interact in small groups in search of particular problems they have had with previous activities, and also negotiate both the different ways which may lead to a solution and the solution itself (problem-solving activity). The teacher might walk about and interact (i.e. be coparticipant), not only with the aim of giving advice on the shortest and most effective way/s but also of posing questions and rising frequent problems which might be useful for learners to control at first sight.[3]

5. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to contribute to the implementation of autonomy in the foreign language classroom in two particular ways: on the theoretical level Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory by accepting the rationale which could help to start off learner autonomy in the sense of developmental and experiential learning. On the practical level, by considering a particular task within classroom work which might contribute to the formation of a self-directed and/or future autonomous learner. Further proposals which help to improve results in foreign language teaching are, however, vital as it is precisely in this context and not in others (i.e. second language instruction) that there exists a greater need to develop autonomous learning personalities.

Notes

[1] An earlier draft of this paper was presented by the first author at EUROSLA-5 (Fifth European Second Language Association Conference), Dublin, September 7-11, 1995.

[2] David Little's (*Learner Autonomy*) foresight of the concept *autonomy* becoming the buzz-word of the 90's in the same way as *communicative* and *authentic* were during the 80's, is thus gradually proving certain.

[3] In our particular case, we work on problems previously raised by the learners themselves while working with authentic texts for the weekly presentation of handouts. Following the learners' own opinion, this is a rewarding experience since they feel how getting used to both the dictionary and the grammar book not only equips them with the means to solve old problems which they had put aside in earlier classroom work but also encourages them to exploit these tools for successful learning.

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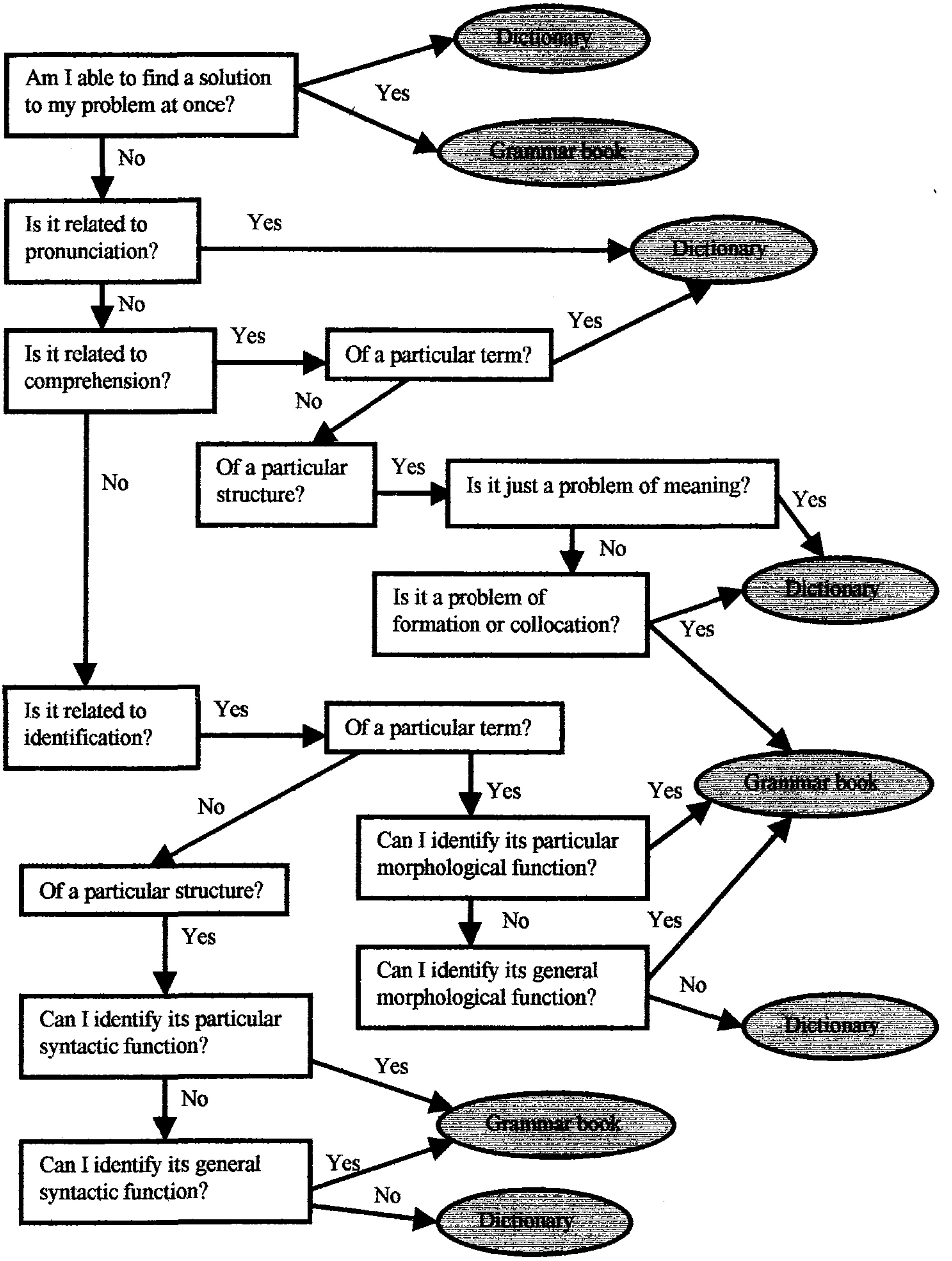

Flowchart on the use of the dictionary and the grammar book