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Autonomous Language Learning When Language Is a Social Practice: Implications for Teacher Educators

ABSTRACT: This article presents a discussion of autonomous language learning within newer understandings of language and language development. After providing a brief literature review of what good language learners do and the onset of autonomous language learning in the 1980s, the article moves forward to present-day understandings of language, and the role that autonomous language learning has within socio-cultural views of language. The article ends with implications for teacher educators who must prepare the next generation of language learners.
KEY WORDS: Autonomous language learning; learning strategies; self-regulation; socio-cultural learning; language practices

ABSTRACT: El presente artículo discute el tema del aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas en el marco de conocimientos más actuales sobre el lenguaje y su desarrollo. Después de presentar una breve reseña de la literatura sobre lo que hacen los buenos aprendices de idiomas y del comienzo del aprendizaje autónomo de lenguas en la literatura en la década de los años ochenta, el artículo continúa con las formas más actuales de entender el lenguaje y el papel que desempeña el aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas dentro de perspectivas socioculturales del lenguaje. El artículo termina con las implicaciones para los maestros que deben preparar a la siguiente generación de aprendices de lenguas.
PALABRAS CLAVES: Aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas; estrategias de aprendizaje; autorregulación; aprendizaje socio-cultural; prácticas del idioma.

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In the field of language teaching, particularly in the context of teaching English as a foreign language in Mexico, the presentation of language learning as autonomous, or a process by which a learner takes control over the their own learning (Holac, 1981), became prominent in the late 1980s, around the same time as

self-access centers began to replace face-to-face teaching in many university settings[1]. Self-access centers enable language learners to select from a series of activities that promote speaking, listening, reading and writing based on measured and perceived learning needs (Domínguez-Gaona, López-Bonilla, & Englander, 2012). Autonomous language learning was based on the premise that students who managed their own learning had more powerful learning experiences than those who were left to the abilities of a language teacher. One of the early advocates of the autonomous language learning was Earl Stevick, who believed in the power of cognitive and motivational investment for learning a new language (Stevick, 1980). Henri Holac (1981), an European language scholar and cognitive scientist, is often credited as the first scholar to argue that to be successful as language learners, students to need to "take charge" of their own learning and to manage their learning through meta-awareness, self-assessment and self-evaluation. However, writing prior to Holac, a number of U.S. language scholars had already turned their attention to learners who take charge of their own learning.

Some Early Thoughts on Good Language Learning

Rubin (1975) asked a fundamental and provocative question for that time period: What makes a good language learner? Based on a bevy of interviews with language learners who had successfully developed proficiency in a new language, Rubin concluded that good language learners are good guessers of meaning connected to language comprehension, willing to appear foolish when speaking and writing, and are risk-takers with language. Good language learners make what Burt and Kiparsky (1972) refer to as local errors, and expect to receive feedback on global errors, errors that impede meaningful communication in conversation.

Seliger (1977) found that being proactive in creating opportunities for language intake[2] was a defining characteristic of good language learners. He distinguished between High Input Generators (HIGs) and Low Input Generators (HIGs). According to Seliger (1977) HIGs actively seek out occasions to listen to the new language, to eavesdrop on conversations, and to interact with speakers of the new language.

Psychological and social distance may also have an impact on a learner's abilities to manage language learning in the way that Holuc (1981) first described it. Schumann (1976) documents a case study of Alberto, a 33 year-old Costa Rican immigrant to the U.S., who after several

[1] Self-access centers began to surface in Mexico in the early 1990s in response to the demand for English language proficiency as NAFTA took hold. Currently, there are some 200 self-access centers in Mexico, offering English and other languages. A few offer indigenous languages, such as Maya (Castillo Zaragoza, 2011).

[2] Intake is defined as language that is comprehended by learners, as opposed to input, which learners may be exposed to, but not comprehend for a variety of reasons.

years in the U.S. had developed only minimal proficiency in English. Schumann argued that Alberto experienced high social distance- mainly in-group enclosure, segregated housing and work relations, and minimal contact with English speakers outside of work. In terms of psychological distance, Alberto had very little affective reasons for becoming like English speakers, owing in part to racism towards Latinos, and in part to his own solidarity with Latino Spanish-speakers of his social class background and level of formal education. Schumann (1976) drew on Gardner and Lambert's (1972) model of language learning motivation types to add heft to his argument that psychological distance can be a powerful reason for wanting to learn or not learn a new language. Gardner and Lambert (1972) discuss integrative and instrumental motivation for learning a new language. Integrative motivation means that the learner wishes to participate with and even become like speakers of the new language. Instrumental motivation was defined as learning a new language in order to gain cultural capital for accessing and succeeding in employment or schooling. In Alberto's case, integrative motivation was nearly absent, which instrumental motivation, buffered by high social and psychological distance, did not surpass the need for just enough English to survive at work and for commercial practices. Gardner and Lambert's findings coupled with Shumann's early work point to the social and psychological complexities of what it means to be a good language learner, and broadening understanding of the good language learner beyond individual factors.

Accordingly, while Holac's work stimulated a new wave of thinking about what it means to take charge of one's own learning in the pursuit of learning a new language, a great deal of foundational work had already been laid. Since Holac's work, numerous language education scholars began to operationalize what autonomous learning might look like in classroom settings. Much of this work focuses on the individual learners and what they can do to learn language autonomously with efficiency. The most influential early work was the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach or CALLA by Chamot and O'Malley (1987). CALLA proposed that students learning in and through a new language can manage their learning more effectively when they use metacognitive strategies – planning for learning, self-monitoring comprehension and production, and self-evaluation of how well a goal has been achieved; cognitive strategies - interaction with learning material by manipulating it mentally (making mental image, rhyming words) or physically (word groupings, note-taking, organizing graphically or with drawings); and social-affective strategies (asking for clarification, using circumlocution). Chamot and O'Malley (1987) admit that these strategies for autonomous learning are nearly identical to what learners who have developed self-directed study skills use for learning any new information.

Following in Chamot and O'Malley's footsteps and extending Holac's original call for autonomous language learning, Oxford (1990; 2011) extended the definition of language learning strategies to include specific actions, behaviors, steps, or

techniques that language leaners employ to improve their own progress in internalizing, storing, retrieving, and using a new language. According to Oxford, good language learners often use language learning strategies consciously.

What is Language and Why it Matters

In my reading of the scholarly literature on autonomous language learning, and its off-shots, language learning strategies, I am struck by the near uniformity in ontological representation of language as something that originates inside the heads of learners. Holac's work portrays the language learner as an individual who takes charge of the cognitive processes involved in learning a new language, regardless of whether the input is from a live person, written or visual material, or a computer generated lesson. Implicit in much of the early work on autonomous language learning and meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies is that language represented in learning materials consists of a set of grammatical rules and lexical devices that develop in a linear process from words and phrases to simple and complex sentences, from halted to native-like rapidity, and from error-laden to error-free speech and writing.

Newer understandings of language have been proposed in the past thirty years that question the notion that language develops cognitively from intake and grammatical rule applications (Krashen, 1985; Tomasello, 2003). Larsen-Freeman (2011), for example, has questioned whether language development in second language learning has a linear order of acquisition, as several prominent language scholars have suggested (e.g., Krashen, 1985) and many English learner textbooks follow. Learners who focus on form in isolation as a learning strategy are less successful than learners who focus on form and meaning (Norris & Ortega, 2000). There is increasing evidence from naturalistic studies of language acquisition that in both children and adults language develops from conversation and the intent of interactions (Lee, Mikesell, Joaquin, Mates, & Schumann, 2009; that a second language emerges from interactions in social contexts (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009) that involve negotiation among speakers for meaning within those contexts (Hopper, 1998). Larsen-Freeman (2011) argues for a view of language and its development that highlights the affect that familiarity with discursive practices has on which language practices emerge from interaction and communicative intentions.

How language is constructed as a cognitive process or a socio-cultural practice matters greatly for how language educators make sense of ideas that pop up in the literature and gain currency with language teachers. Clearly, when autonomous learning and learning strategies surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s, the dominant conceptualization of language was one of linearity and cognitively based. In recent years, language scholars have begun to question these conceptualizations and argue for a more social, interactive approach to understanding language as a localized practice (Pennycook, 2010) that emerges through social interaction, interpretation, and performance (Valdes, Capitelli, & Alvarez, 2010). Cognition is

still involved in language learning, but the primary means for language development comes from the need to make sense with others who are also using the language being developed by learners.

Issues with Autonomous Learning and Learning Strategies

In recent years, with the socio-cultural turn in language and language education, many language scholars and educators find it very difficult to advocate for autonomous learning and cognitive language learning strategies that are based on the concept of an individual learner and language as something that resides in the head of individual learners. The greatest qualms are with respect to how language is positioned by early autonomous learning advocates and language learning strategy specialists. Many find it difficult to accept the idea that language learners can learn a new language without continuous human interaction, interpretation, and feedback from others.

A large fraction of my own hesitation comes from my understandings of Vygotsky's social learning theory, which proposes that all learning is socially regulated, before it becomes self-regulated (Vygotsky, 1986). From this perspective, the development of learner autonomy (if there is such a thing) necessarily involves concomitant social, interactional dimensions as well as individual cognition, but it can never be only individual, and self-regulation is always followed by social interaction if learning is to continue. Accordingly, while all learning is first and foremost social, a basic trait underlying autonomous and language learning strategies is self-regulation and not autonomy (Renalli, 2012). Self-regulation emerges from social interaction with more capable peers or adults, followed by more interaction. I tend to agree with Tseng, Dörnyei, and Schmitt (2006), who argue forcefully that the field of language education should abandon the use of individualized autonomous learning and language learning strategies and instead focus on self-regulated learning emerging from social interaction (See Murray, 2014).

A related source of my reluctance to accept autonomous learning as it has been constructed from Holac forward is the bevy of questions about what autonomous language learning means. As Huang and Benson (2012) point out, most definitions of autonomous learning are descriptions of autonomy, of ways of being autonomous. Benson (2011), moreover, argues that the idea of "taking control" over one's language learning as being autonomous is challenging to verify empirically. He suggests that researchers use "taking control" of one's language learning, arguing that *control* is easier to operationalize than charge and easier to infer or observe when a learner is or is not taking control over their own learning. For me, taking control of one's learning is synonymous with self-regulation, as Vygotsky first introduced it.

There are issues with language learning strategies that trouble me as well. Similar to the term *autonomous*, the term *learning strategies* suffer from definitional fuzziness (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006). As we have seen above, a learning strategy can be a thought, a behavior, or an emotion (Dörnyei, 2005), and even

more troubling, none of these are associated with local learning contexts. Excluding local contexts from what learners do makes little sense from a socio-cultural perspective of language learning (Pennycook, 2010). Moreover, it is not at all clear at what level self-regulation operates when local contexts are brought to the forefront of teaching and learning. Is self-regulation a purely cognitive operation, or for self-regulation to occur, does not a learner need to engage with others, either materially or socially to activate it? It is questions like these that remain to be investigated more deeply.

Implications for Teacher Educators

Clearly, there are language learners who are successful and those who are less so. Successful language learning, of course, depends on what the purposes of learning a language are, and how learners as well as teachers view learning. The early work by Rubin, Seliger, and Schumann, suggest that there are social, including political, and psychological forces that come to bear in any language-learning situation. Teacher educators, and teachers alike need to understand what these forces are and look for ways to intervene and mitigate them to the extend possible, given the local contexts of language learning. There are no doubt some remote areas where self-access centers are the only available means of contact with new language resources and materials. But, for the vast majority of language learning contexts, people are involved, either as mentors (asesores, in México) or teachers who hold a great deal of control of classroom interaction, opportunities for students to interpret meanings, and to perform in the new language.

Classrooms in which students have a variety of choices -participant structures, opportunities for genuine interaction, interpretation, and performance, are more likely to tap into self-regulation practices than in classrooms that are teacher directed and overly focused on form (Hurd & Lewis, 2008). That being said, however, teacher educators need to show novice teachers multiple ways for teaching their language students how to self-regulate language learning. New teachers can also be taught how to recognize self-regulation efforts on the part of their students (Renalli, 2012; Woodrow, 2005). Teacher educators can and should engage beginning teachers in inquiry, systematic observation of students during whole and small group settings, stimulated recall, field note taking, and the development of rubrics for learning. These practices will help new teachers learn to see how language learning is not only social, but also how students self-regulate and what kinds of activities assist learning towards self-regulated language use.

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