

# TAKING CONTROL

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## Autonomy in Language Learning

Edited by  
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# Contents

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List of Contributors	ix
Preface	xi
Introduction <i>Richard Pemberton</i>	1
<b>Section I: Introductory perspectives</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Towards autonomous learning: some theoretical, empirical and practical issues <i>David Nunan</i>	13
2. Concepts of autonomy in language learning <i>Phil Benson</i>	27
3. Promoting learner autonomy: criteria for the selection of appropriate methods <i>Edith Esch</i>	35
4. Learner culture and learner autonomy in the Hong Kong Chinese context <i>Herbert D. Pierson</i>	49
<b>Section II: The learner and the learning process</b>	<b>59</b>
5. A study of strategy use in independent learners <i>Diana Simmons</i>	61
6. Self-assessment in self-directed learning: issues of learner diversity <i>Chihiro Kinoshita Thomson</i>	77

7. Language counselling for learner autonomy: the skilled helper in self-access language learning <i>Rena Kelly</i>	93
8. Conversation exchange: a way towards autonomous language learning <i>Peter Voller and Valerie Pickard</i>	115
9. Autonomy in the classroom: peer assessment <i>Lindsay Miller and Raymond Ng</i>	133
<b>Section III: Materials</b>	<b>147</b>
10. Materials design for the promotion of learner autonomy: how explicit is 'explicit'? <i>Barbara Sinclair</i>	149
11. The role of materials in the development of autonomous learning <i>Winnie Lee</i>	167
12. Lights, camera, action: exploring and exploiting films in self-access learning <i>Elsie Christopher and Susanna Ho</i>	185
<b>Section IV: Technology</b>	<b>201</b>
13. Freedom to learn and compulsion to interact: promoting learner autonomy through the use of information systems and information technologies <i>David Little</i>	203
14. Interactive video as self-access support for language-learning beginners <i>David Gardner and Rocío Blasco García</i>	219
15. From word processing to text processing <i>John Milton, Ian Smallwood and James Purchase</i>	233
<b>Section V: The evaluation of learner autonomy</b>	<b>249</b>
16. 'The blind man and the bubble': researching self-access <i>Philip Riley</i>	251

17. The acquisition of vocabulary in an autonomous learning environment — the first months of beginning English <i>Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen</i>	265
18. Use and abuse of autonomy in computer-assisted language learning: some evidence from student interaction with <i>SuperCloze</i> <i>Vance Stevens</i>	281
References	303
Index	327

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## Introduction

*Richard Pemberton*

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The chapters that follow provide insights into a field of language learning that has been attracting an increasing amount of attention over the last 20 years. Numerous books for language teachers have appeared during this period on the subjects of learner autonomy, self-directed learning, self-access systems and individualized/independent learning (e.g. Harding-Esch 1976; Altman and James 1980; Holec 1981; Geddes and Sturtridge 1982a; Mason 1984; Riley 1985; Dickinson 1987; Wenden and Rubin 1987; Brookes and Grundy 1988; Holec 1988; Ellis and Sinclair 1989; Little 1989; Sheerin 1989; Willing 1989; Gathercole 1990; Little 1991; Wenden 1991; Dickinson 1992; Page 1992; Esch 1994; Gardner and Miller 1994; Dam 1995); special issues of the journals *Die Neueren Sprachen* and *System* were devoted to learner autonomy in 1994 and 1995, respectively; and the aim of developing autonomy in language learning has been incorporated, to greater or lesser degrees, into many countries' national curricula.

The reasons for this trend are varied, and have to do with factors as diverse as: educational philosophy; language-learning theory; political beliefs (from widely differing perspectives); the need to adapt to rapid changes in technology, communications and employment and the increasing recognition that the ability to learn is more important in today's environment than a set of knowledge; the opportunities provided by technological developments and increased communication links around the world; and attempts to expand educational provision at the same time as cutting costs. However, with people from a wide variety of backgrounds using terms like 'autonomy' and 'independence' for a variety of purposes, there is a massive potential for misunderstanding, and so we turn first to the question of terminology.



## Terminology

The word *autonomy* appears in nine of the titles listed above, and a glance in recent language teaching and applied linguistics journals is likely to confirm the impression that it is taking over the buzzword status that *communicative* and *authentic* held in the 1980s. There are a number of problems associated with this growing popularity (see, e.g., Little 1994c), two of which concern us here. The first is that, as can be seen from the range of terms used in the book titles mentioned above, different terms are often used to refer to the same thing. The second, related, problem is that the same term is often used to mean different things. Before we go any further, then, we need to clarify what concepts we are addressing in this book, and what words we are using to express them.

The goal of the contributors to this book is to help learners develop the potential to take control of every stage of their own learning, from the setting of goals through to evaluation. In this, they share some common ground with proponents of learning systems which allow (or can allow) learners varying degrees of choice over the learning process, such as 'distance learning', 'flexible learning', 'individualized instruction', 'open learning', 'self-access learning' and 'self-instruction'. Where they differ, however, is that the systems just mentioned are ways of organizing learning and not approaches which have as their central aim the development of a particular capacity in the learner.

*Self-instruction*, for example, is taken either to refer to learning without a teacher (e.g. Little 1991: 3) or learning "without the direct control of a teacher" (Dickinson 1987: 5). *Distance learning* is a way of organizing learners which usually only allows learners control over access (the time, place and pace of their study). *Open learning* (of which distance learning is a subset) allows choices within the curriculum as well as in access; it does have taking responsibility for learning as a goal, but it appears fundamentally to be an institutional response to the need to take on board more students while at the same time cutting costs (Lewis 1995). *Individualized instruction* involves the use of activities designed to meet the needs of individual learners, but it is the teacher who prepares or adapts materials, sets objectives and evaluates the learner's ability to perform required skills (Logan 1980). *Flexible learning* is a similar approach to language learning at secondary level in the UK in which the teacher or department provides materials and activities; the learner has some choice over what to do when, but there is usually little opportunity to negotiate about learning goals or method of evaluation (Page 1992: 83; Evans 1993). *Self-access learning* refers to learning from materials/facilities that are organized in order to facilitate learning;

much reference is made to this type of learning in the book, but again, the learning may range from self-directed to teacher-directed.

The labels that remain to us in order to put our aims into words are, of course, 'learner autonomy' and 'self-directed learning'. *Self-directed learning* is a concept which has been widely promoted and researched in the adult education field, particularly in the USA. In the literature, the term has been used in two senses: to mean both the process of/the techniques used in directing one's own learning, and the change of consciousness that is the result of such learning (Brookfield 1985). Candy (1991: 23) further distinguishes between four aspects of the term:

1. a personal attribute (personal autonomy);
2. the willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education (self-management);
3. a mode of organizing instruction in formal settings (learner-control); and
4. the individual, noninstitutional pursuit of learning opportunities in the "natural societal setting" (autodidaxy).

Similar distinctions (and therefore the possibility for misunderstanding) exist in the definitions of 'learner autonomy' and 'self-direction' in language learning. Here the classic definition, referring to *autonomy* as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" is that of Holec (1981: 3), and you will find several definitions of this type in the early pages of each of the first four chapters of the book. Central to this definition of autonomy is the concept of knowing how to learn. Holec sees autonomy as an *ability* or *capacity* that needs to be acquired (i.e. learning how to learn) and as separate from the learning that may take place when autonomy is being or has been acquired; this learning Holec labels *self-directed learning*, which clearly, in the context of this book, has similarities with Candy's third meaning 'learner-control'. In this view, then, 'autonomy' is a capacity and 'self-directed learning' is a way in which learning is carried out.

This distinction is accepted by most writers in the field, apart from Dickinson (1987: 11) who calls the potential to accept responsibility for one's learning "self-direction", and complete responsibility for one's learning, carried out without the involvement of a teacher or pedagogic materials, "autonomy". Autonomy is seen generally as a capacity that is rarely, if ever, realized in its 'ideal' state: as Little (1991: 5; see also Chapter 13) emphasizes, because of the essential human need to interact with others, "the freedoms conferred by autonomy are never absolute, always conditional and constrained". Nor is autonomy seen as being a steady state: as many have pointed out, an autonomous learner may well choose teacher-

direction at certain stages in his or her learning, and is likely to be autonomous in one situation, but not in another.

Having made some attempt to clarify the profusion of terms and meanings that cloud the whole issue of autonomy, it is as well to point out that the term 'autonomous language learning' (eschewed by Holec on the grounds that 'autonomous' should not be used of a process) is now found quite frequently, and indeed occurs in this book. This can cause some confusion, as the term may refer to self-directed learning or to learning (usually self-directed) that is carried out by autonomous learners; but the sense will usually be clear.

### **The focus and aim of the book**

The title of the book thus embraces both the means and the end of learner autonomy. Some, like Candy, may argue that 'taking control' over the learning situation is not a sufficient condition for the development of autonomy, and that in formal educational situations the 'ghost' of the instructor lingers on, making it less likely that autonomy will be developed. We would agree with the first point, but we believe that experience is a necessary condition, a vital factor in the development of autonomy. Moreover, as Holec (1981) points out, it is unrealistic to expect learners to want or be able to learn how to learn without being in a position to direct their own language learning at the same time. As for the second point, we do not believe that educational institutions make the acquisition of autonomy impossible, and we discuss this point further below. The focus of the book is on *fostering learner autonomy within educational institutions*, and while several chapters reveal difficulties that may be faced, all are predicated on the belief that — given appropriate support — learner autonomy in these environments is an achievable goal.

The aim of the book is threefold: to examine key aspects of current theory and practice in the field; to exemplify the range of learning and research projects that are under way; and to highlight some of the problems and possibilities that lie ahead. The book combines a wealth of theoretical perspective with a wide range of practical examples, drawn from both classroom and self-access learning in a variety of cultural contexts. The division of the book into sections on Introductory perspectives, Learners and the learning process, Materials, Technology, and Evaluation provides a framework for readers to examine their own thinking on major issues and to consider how their thinking might most effectively translate into reality. We believe that the book makes an important contribution to the debate about learner autonomy, and we hope that it will be of value both

to those already involved in helping language learners develop autonomy, and to those who are thinking about doing so.

## Current issues of debate

A number of issues concerning autonomy in language learning have come to the fore in recent years. It may help to discuss some of those of particular relevance to this book by considering the following questions:

1. In what situations is learner autonomy an appropriate goal?
2. What type of autonomy should we aim at?

In response to the first question, it might be argued that learner autonomy is inappropriate in certain educational or cultural settings. We have already mentioned Candy's doubts about the likelihood of self-directed learning that is carried out in formal institutions leading to learner autonomy. There is a perception among certain adult educators, perhaps inspired by the example of Allen Tough (1971) and his Learning Projects (all of which were carried out by learners without any contact or input from educational institutions — i.e., in Candy's terms, autodidacts), that self-directed learning equates with adult learning outside of formal education. Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen's chapter in this book (Chapter 17), along with Leni Dam's other publications (e.g. Dam and Gabrielsen 1988; Dam 1994, 1995), answers the query about whether self-directed learning can be carried out and autonomy developed with children. All the work emanating over the years from the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL) and other institutions, all the work represented in the titles listed at the beginning of this introduction, and indeed the chapters in this book, attest to the possibility of developing learner autonomy in formal institutions. As Little (1991) says, autonomy involves a psychological relation between the learner and what is to be learned, and can therefore occur anywhere; and the freedoms that exist despite restrictive educational environments mean that the "counsel of despair" (ibid.: 40) can be rejected. (See also Gremmo and Riley 1995: 154-6.)

The doubts about cultural appropriateness are more serious. Evidence from adult education has been unclear, often consisting of anecdotal reports (see, e.g., Brookfield 1985: 11; Nolan 1990; Brockett and Hiemstra 1991). Riley's (1988) admittedly impressionistic account of the differing responses of four national groups to self-directed learning has rightly set alarm bells ringing around the world. This is particularly true in South-east Asia, where a large number of self-access centres and self-directed learning projects

have sprung up in recent years. Questions have been raised, for example, about the appropriateness of the goal of autonomy for Asian learners (e.g. Jones 1994) and of asking culturally diverse groups of learners to assess their own progress (Thomson, Chapter 6). At the same time, others do not see cultural obstacles as being insurmountable (e.g. Nunan, citing Willing 1988, Chapter 1; Esch, Chapter 3; Little, Chapter 13) or provide evidence that traditional learning practice and cultural traits may actually contribute to the development of learner autonomy (Ho and Crookall 1995; Pierson, Chapter 4). The debate continues.

In response to the second question ('What type of autonomy should we aim at?'), two oppositions might be suggested: individual vs. social; and psychological vs. political. Many of the contributors to this book have stressed the vital importance of interaction and negotiation to the development of autonomy (see especially Chapters 2, 3 and 13). Those working in self-access centres are called upon to find ways of helping learners to participate in social interaction (Benson 1995). Holec's definition has been altered to add a social dimension to the existing individual one:

Learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person. (Dam 1995: 1)

All this reflects a growing commitment to the importance of interaction and collaborative learning, and an insistence that learning does not take place in a vacuum and that self-direction does not mean learning on your own. Alongside this emphasis on the social nature of learning, a re-emphasis on the political nature of autonomy has started to emerge. Not surprisingly, the more a concept is discussed, the more likely it is to appear 'normal' and at the same time to be 'normalized' by mainstream culture. This is the argument made by Phil Benson (Chapter 2) as he outlines the gradual trend to overlook the political foundation for Holec's (1981) definition, and to concentrate on an individual, psychological version of autonomy. Benson's call for a return to a more political view of learner autonomy is echoed in a recent article by Little (1996), in which he contends that learner autonomy is essentially a political concept, and makes the point that to argue for the removal of psychological barriers between school knowledge and the learner's knowledge is in fact a political act that challenges existing power structures. This is an aspect of learner autonomy that has received relatively little attention from language teachers until now; assuming that teachers do not continue to avoid problematic issues (Benson, *in press*), that situation is likely to change.



## The organization of the book

As with any collection, it would have been possible to organize the book in a variety of different ways. For example, a section on Culture was at first envisaged (this is central to the chapters by Pierson and Thomson, and is touched on in many others, such as those by Nunan, Esch and Little). The chapter by Little could easily have fitted into the Introductory section, as could the chapters by Nunan and Sinclair into the section on Learners and the learning process, the chapters by Dam/Legenhausen and Nunan into the section on Materials, and the chapter by Stevens into the section on Technology. You may like to follow up these connections or prefer to make connections of your own.

The book is organized into five sections. The first section, 'Introductory perspectives', sets the foundation for the book, and discusses important theoretical and practical issues that are followed up later on: the relationship between learner-centred teaching and the development of learner autonomy (David Nunan, Chapter 1); the mainstreaming and depoliticization of the once radical version of autonomy (Phil Benson, Chapter 2); criteria for learning environments that are likely to promote learner autonomy (Edith Esch, Chapter 3); and the question of whether cultural factors predispose certain groups of learners against autonomy (Herbert Pierson, Chapter 4).

The next section then tackles the element that is central to the success or failure of learner autonomy: 'The learner and the learning process'. In the section, a variety of projects are reported on in which teachers interact with learners or organize a learning experience with the aim of helping learners direct their own learning and develop their autonomy. The interactions/opportunities described are: strategy training (Diana Simmons, Chapter 5); self-assessment (Chihiro Thomson, Chapter 6); counselling (Rena Kelly, Chapter 7); conversation exchange (Peter Voller and Valerie Pickard, Chapter 8); and peer assessment (Lindsay Miller and Raymond Ng, Chapter 9).

Section 3 focuses on a factor that is fundamental to the way learning is organized: 'Materials'. In Chapter 10, Barbara Sinclair considers how much explicitness is appropriate in learner-training materials. In Chapter 11, Winnie Lee analyzes learner perceptions of authentic and textbook materials, and in Chapter 12, Elsie Christopher and Susanna Ho report on a group film discussion project carried out in self-access mode.

Section 4 examines a related area: 'Technology'. First, David Little considers how far learner autonomy can be fostered by various computer-based technologies (Chapter 13). Two of the technologies that Little discusses are exemplified in the chapters that follow: David Gardner and

Rocío Blasco García report on learner use of an interactive video program (Chapter 14) and John Milton, Ian Smallwood and James Purchase describe the features of a prototype computer program designed to aid language use (Chapter 15).

In the final section, the attention turns to 'The evaluation of learner autonomy'. In this section, the papers are concerned with the evaluation of learning that takes place in autonomous or self-access settings. In Chapter 16, Philip Riley explores methodologies appropriate for research into self-directed and self-access learning. Then Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhäusen report on a project comparing the vocabulary acquisition of an autonomous secondary school class with that of traditional classes (Chapter 17). Finally, Vance Stevens analyzes data from a project investigating the use of help features in a self-access CALL program (Chapter 18).

You will find more detailed introductions to each chapter at the beginning of each section.

## **Future directions**

In terms of content, the issues of debate mentioned earlier, along with others discussed by the contributors to this book, will continue to engage those involved with promoting autonomy in language learning for some time to come. Other avenues for future research have been suggested by, among others, Skehan (1989: 134, 140), Candy (1991: 438ff.) and Gremmo and Riley (1995). There is certainly no shortage of areas worthy of investigation. However, there is obviously still a long way to go if we are to convince educational decision-makers of the need to match lip-service to the goal of learner autonomy with appropriate changes in educational practice.

What sort of research approaches and methods should we employ in trying to achieve this aim? Candy (*op. cit.*: 426ff.) argues that the positivistic approach is inappropriate for the study of self-directed learning, and that instead we should use "interpretive" methods that focus on the personal meanings and perceptions of individual learners. Riley (Chapter 16) clarifies the debates over positivist/antipositivist and quantitative/qualitative research approaches. Some of his suggestions are similar to those of Candy, but he argues for a "mixed" approach that "rejects the either/or terms of the qualitative vs. quantitative debate and the absolute distinction between objectivity and subjectivity". The guidelines and suggestions in his chapter should prove useful to those starting to carry out research in the area.

# I

## Introductory perspectives

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One of the main purposes of this book is to provide an account of the concept of autonomy as it relates to second language learning and to discuss how this goal can be translated into practice. In this introductory section, which sets a theoretical foundation for the book, the concept of learner autonomy is discussed from the varying perspectives of teachers, learners and self-access centre managers. David Nunan (Chapter 1) presents examples of how learner- and learning-centred classrooms can help develop learner autonomy, while Phil Benson (Chapter 2) argues for a critical approach to autonomy that addresses issues of social control. Edith Esch (Chapter 3) proposes criteria for learning environments that are likely to promote learner autonomy, and Herbert Pierson (Chapter 4) uses evidence from ancient writings and recent research to argue that autonomy may not be as antithetical to cultures outside the European democratic tradition as might be supposed. Each chapter raises important theoretical and practical issues relating to learner autonomy that are followed up, directly or indirectly, later in the book.

In the first chapter, David Nunan explores the concepts of learner-centredness, learning-centredness and learner autonomy. Nunan argues that autonomy is a relative concept, and that curricula and classrooms which help the learner to develop learning strategies or skills (e.g. the ability to plan, reflect on and evaluate their own learning) can lead to a degree of learner autonomy. Nunan supports his argument by reference to research studies of learner-centred approaches to teaching which led to improvements in language skills and in the ability to take responsibility for learning. Finally, he provides practical illustrations of how "learning skills" (and hence, learner autonomy) might be developed in an "autonomy-focused" classroom through syllabus and materials design. (This is taken up in more detail by Barbara Sinclair in Chapter 10). Nunan's chapter usefully reminds us that, as educators, we do not need to regard autonomy as something achievable only by those learning entirely outside institutions and under



their own steam; we can — and should — make a start in our own classrooms.

In Chapter 2, Phil Benson takes a somewhat contrary position to that of David Nunan. While not denying that the concept of autonomy has important psychological dimensions, Benson maintains that in the years since Holec's definition in 1979, there has come to be an emphasis on psychological autonomy, individual choice and learner-training techniques, while the political aspect of autonomy has largely been overlooked. This has occurred as the once radical concept of autonomy has been absorbed into the mainstream of educational thinking. From the viewpoint of critical language pedagogy, Benson argues for a more radical, critical version of autonomy that sees it not as an ability or the handing over of responsibility within the learning situation, but rather as a right, as a concept involving control of the learning process, of resources, and of language.

Benson's analysis addresses broad issues of control and power more overtly than any other chapter in the book. Some of us may find these issues uncomfortable, particularly in the current educational climate, and dealing with them can be problematic, as Benson demonstrates. But a consideration of where exactly we stand in terms of the issues Benson raises (e.g. collective decision-making, social change and the extent of control available to learners) is overdue and will also surely give our work (both collectively and individually) a sharper focus.

Benson's emphasis on the social and collaborative nature of learner autonomy is echoed in Chapter 3, in which Edith Esch proposes criteria for language-learning environments which are likely to promote learner autonomy. The criteria that she puts forward are: the provision of choice and flexibility within the system; the capacity of the system to be adapted, and of materials to be modified, according to the learning plans or paradigms of the user; the existence of support systems which encourage reflection through social interaction; and the provision of collaborative learning activities and networks. In her discussion, Esch stresses the importance of three factors that she sees as essential for the development of learner autonomy: learning by doing, reflection and conceptualization, and interaction and negotiation.

At a time of rapid changes in technology and communication, Esch considers ways in which the latest advances may be used to promote or counter learner autonomy, a topic discussed further by David Little in Chapter 13. She concludes that the main obstacle to learner autonomy is likely to be, not cultural differences (as some have suggested), but the onset of standardized language skills-training packages "where no engagement of the learners' cognitive abilities and social responsibilities is required".

The relationship between learner autonomy and culture is explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

In this chapter, Herbert Pierson responds to objections that cultural impediments prevent autonomous language learning from establishing itself as a goal of education in older, less dynamic traditional learning cultures rooted outside mainstream Eurocentric cultures. Using Hong Kong Chinese learners as his basis for discussion, Pierson contends that contemporary structural factors in Hong Kong, rather than deep-rooted cultural factors, might make learners less amenable to autonomy as a goal and make them less confident in following a language course based on the principles of autonomous learning. To support this view he draws on the authority of ancient Chinese writers as well as contemporary Chinese intellectuals and institutions to demonstrate that there exists in a culture as old as China's a clear tradition and support for learner autonomy. He thus concludes that experiments in autonomous language learning cannot be dismissed out of hand on the basis of purely cultural arguments. Pierson ends by outlining some of the ways in which one institution has set out to promote learner autonomy, conscious of the fact that all learners, whatever their cultural background, are individuals.

## II

### The learner and the learning process

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This section reports on projects in which teachers/helpers interact with learners or organize a learning experience with the aim of increasing learner control over the learning process and developing learner autonomy. Similar projects, involving the use or creation of language-learning materials, are reported in later sections; here the focus is on the capacity of learners to develop new ways of learning through training or counselling or through the provision of opportunities for the practice of self-directed learning.

One type of help that can be provided is strategy training (see also the chapters by Nunan, Esch and Sinclair). In Chapter 5, Diana Simmons reports on the effect of strategy training on the cognitive and metacognitive skills of four adult ESL learners enrolled on a six-week Independent Learning Program. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, Simmons found that learners used a greater number and wider range of strategies at the end of the training period.

Simmons's study focuses on the reported and observed learning strategies of individual learners. In Chapter 6, by contrast, Chihiro Kinoshita Thomson looks at learners as members of cultural and linguistic groups. Within the context of a self-directed/self-assessed project run with a mixed group of learners of Japanese, she noted that self-ratings and confidence in the ability to learn without direction from a teacher appeared to be affected by native language and gender. Given a group of diverse cultural backgrounds, it would seem that including self-ratings as part of the course mark can be problematic, unless there is considerable preparation beforehand. The question of assessment is examined again in Chapter 9, but in the context of a culturally homogeneous group of learners.

Clearly, the learner is central to the development of learner autonomy. This does not mean, however, that the teacher should be marginalized, whether the reasons are educational, political, or financial. As Thomson shows, if learners are to take more control over their learning, they will need a lot of assistance along the way, particularly if their previous experience has been overwhelmingly teacher-directed.

This point is further emphasized in Chapter 7, in which Rena Kelly turns the focus to the skills required by *teachers* in the development of learner autonomy. Kelly argues that in order to help learners undergo a transformation in their beliefs, teachers need to develop the helping skills of one-to-one therapeutic counselling. She outlines the macro- and micro-skills of counselling and the humanistic values that underlie them; and shows how they can be applied in the context of helping learners to control their own learning with reference to the type of counselling offered at various stages during individual projects. She also provides extracts of consultation sessions to exemplify how learning strategy and language awareness can be developed.

A very different way of promoting learner autonomy is presented in Chapter 8. In this chapter, Peter Voller and Valerie Pickard describe a conversation exchange scheme in which there is minimal teacher involvement, and in which learner autonomy is developed, not through training or therapeutic dialogue, but through experience. Voller and Pickard consider the factors that can lead to success in such learner exchanges, and make recommendations for future exchange schemes.

The final chapter in this section focuses on *peer* assessment, one of the features of learner-centred approaches mentioned by Nunan in the first chapter. This might seem to veer away from the focus on *self* that is a central feature of the book. But, as Lindsay Miller and Raymond Ng point out, taking control of an aspect of learning that takes place in the classroom is an important prerequisite for taking responsibility for learning outside the classroom.

In the chapter, Miller and Ng describe a project in which groups of undergraduate students designed and conducted tests to assess their peers' speaking ability. Although attitudes to the process and reliability of peer assessment were on the whole not positive, the marks given by the peers were close to those given by the teachers, and Miller and Ng suggest that with more time and preparation, student perceptions would become more positive. Other advantages of the project were increased language awareness and an awareness of the benefits of negotiation.

# III

## Materials

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This section examines the design and use of materials for autonomous language learning. Chapter 10 focuses on learner-training materials from the point of view of the materials writer. Chapters 11 and 12 are concerned with the use of authentic materials, from the point of view both of the teacher and the learner.

In Chapter 10, Barbara Sinclair considers the question of explicitness in learner-training tasks. She finds that most activities in current ELT course books that are designed to promote learner autonomy are not presented in an explicit way, and are therefore not likely to develop language-learning awareness. However, as she points out, excessive explicitness can be equally problematic, and she goes on to consider questions of how much explicitness to include, how to present the information, and where to locate it. Sinclair then turns to materials in self-access centres and examines how to balance the need for learner training with the need to allow learners to make their own choices. She illustrates her points by showing the ways that the appropriate level of explicitness can be achieved in course materials and tasks designed for use in self-access centres.

In Chapter 11, Winnie Lee examines learner perceptions of authentic and pedagogic materials in a self-access situation. The findings from her study of self-access language learners shed light on the question of whether to use authentic or non-authentic textbook materials in developing learner autonomy. Lee concludes that authentic materials tended to be enjoyed more overall and to be preferred by higher proficiency students. However, they were in general not perceived to aid learning as effectively as textbooks, especially by learners of comparatively low proficiency; these learners sometimes feel bewildered and confused when faced with authentic material, lacking as it does the systematic organization that they are used to in ordinary textbooks. Lee suggests, therefore, that we should not avoid authentic materials, but rather help learners to use them more effectively. She ends with practical recommendations for making both the organization and the use of authentic materials more systematic, with the aim of

gradually enabling learners to select and design their own tasks.

In Chapter 12, Elsie Christopher and Susanna Ho report on a self-access film discussion project, in which learners watched and then discussed (in groups) a series of movies. Generic and specific worksheets of the type recommended by Lee for use with authentic materials were provided as discussion catalysts. Christopher and Ho's data show that by the end of the project learners had become more confident in their speaking and participated more actively in discussions. The success of the project in this regard suggests that interaction in a non-threatening group situation can be a powerful way of building self-esteem — one of the preconditions for developing learner autonomy.

# IV

## Technology

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This section examines the use of technology to promote learner autonomy. As Esch points out in her chapter, technology is often seen as automatically aiding learner autonomy. In fact, technology, like materials, can hinder learner autonomy just as easily as promote it — what counts is the way in which it can be used, and the extent to which the technology controls the learner.

In Chapter 13, David Little explores the processes involved in learner autonomy and considers how these processes can be fostered by computer-based technologies. In the first part of the chapter, Little points out that autonomy (as freedom to learn) is a characteristic of humans which is, paradoxically, constrained by the equally human need to interact (i.e. dependence). He sees this “compulsion to interact” as fundamental to learning. Little draws implications from the unconscious autonomy of L1 acquisition for the conscious autonomy required for successful L2 learning in formal education, involving a combination of learning by doing and learning by reflection.

In the second part of the chapter, Little discusses ways in which information systems can facilitate the development of learner autonomy. He considers three types of interaction: interaction *with* information systems (e.g. using tutorial and pedagogic CALL programs), interaction *around* information systems (e.g. group word processing or group interaction around an interactive video program) and interaction *via* information systems (e.g. using e-mail and the World Wide Web). Little argues that an information system will develop learner autonomy to the extent that it is able to facilitate collaborative interaction and (through interaction) reflection on language and language learning. He thus sees ‘inhuman’ information systems as having the potential to nurture a very human characteristic — autonomy.

One of the types of system described by Little in his discussion of interaction that can take place *around* information systems is his *Autotutor* interactive video program. David Gardner and Rocío Blasco García describe

another interactive video program in Chapter 14. A key feature of their program is the bilingual support provided to viewers as they watch parts of a full-length movie, and the authors consider to what extent this support could help beginning learners of Spanish develop enough confidence to watch full-length movies independently. Their findings reinforce Lee's conclusion (Chapter 11) about the need of low proficiency students for support when dealing with authentic texts. Gardner and Blasco García's data also illustrate the use made of support — an aspect of learner use of technology which is examined in more detail in Chapter 18.

Another program that provides access to authentic texts is described in Chapter 15. In this chapter, John Milton, Ian Smallwood and James Purchase describe a prototype computer program designed to aid language use. In the program, the user will have access to a variety of linguistic data, all from within his/her normal word-processing environment. The program allows for learning by doing and learning by modelling, and largely provides the opportunity for, in Little's terms, interaction *with* an information system. At the present stage, peer collaboration (interaction *around* an information system) is an optional feature of the system and it is not clear to what extent the program might develop language-learning awareness or lead to learner autonomy. But it will be interesting to see to what extent users of such a powerful tool (like certain users of word processors) are enabled to reflect on their writing and to take more control over it as a result.



## The evaluation of learner autonomy

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Whereas several chapters in previous sections have evaluated projects designed to help learners move towards autonomy in language learning, the final chapters of the book are concerned with the evaluation of the learning that takes place in autonomous or self-access environments. In Chapter 16, a number of fundamental questions relating to research and research methodologies are discussed; and in Chapters 17 and 18, quantitative methods are used to evaluate autonomous and self-access language learning.

In Chapter 16, Philip Riley explores methodologies and concepts appropriate for research into autonomous and self-access learning. He discusses the opposition between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, arguing for 'alternative' or 'mixed' approaches. He then elaborates on standards for educational research that any research project should try to meet, and finally mentions a variety of research approaches that bridge or stand outside the qualitative/quantitative divide, and are appropriate for the study of self-access language learning.

The two chapters which follow exemplify two of the research approaches that Riley introduces at the end of his chapter: empirical and action research. Both chapters happen to involve quantitative data analysis.

Chapter 17 represents one of the few attempts to compare autonomous language learning with learning that takes place in a traditional classroom in terms of the language that is learned. In the chapter, Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen report on a project which compares the initial vocabulary acquisition of a secondary school class learning 'autonomously' (e.g. the learners ask for/select/produce/share words of interest to them) with classes following textbook-based syllabuses. As Dam and Legenhausen make clear, theirs is a comparison rather than a controlled experimental study, but their results do suggest that the autonomous approach may be at least on a par with traditional approaches in terms of facilitating language acquisition (leaving aside other benefits); and that autonomous learning can occur with an age group often thought to have been socialized into

teacher-dependence.

In Chapter 18, Vance Stevens reports on the quantitative analysis stage of an action research project investigating the use and abuse of help features in a CALL cloze program. His data show that students working on CALL programs in self-access mode may abuse help features to a greater extent than CALL developers realize. Readers may like to consider whether the depth of individual data that Stevens was able to obtain would be extended or compromised by more qualitative (and 'obtrusive') research methods.

# Index

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- adult education *see* education
  - system
- affective factors 63, 123-4, 139-41, 169-79, 186, 191, 204, 231, 263;  
*see also* confidence, motivation, self-esteem
- Ager et al. 116
- Allwright 29, 30, 167
- Altman & James 1
- Amor et al. 270
- Armitage 223
- assessment 32
  - peer assessment 60, 123, 125, 133-46
    - reliability of 137-45
  - public/university examinations 51, 54, 79
  - self-assessment 18-19, 20, 21, 26, 59, 67, 77-91, 103, 123, 134, 135, 145, 163-4, 167, 178
    - reliability of 82-3, 88, 89, 135
  - teacher assessment 98, 103, 104, 134, 135, 137-9, 143, 178
- Assinder 17
- Aston 167, 169
- authentic *see* materials
- autodidaxy 3, 5
- autonomy *see also* autodidaxy,  
learning how to learn, self-directed learning
  - and culture 5-6, 10-11, 20, 46-7, 49-58, 59, 77-91, 97-8, 208, 253-4
  - and first language acquisition/developmental learning 77, 201, 204-6, 208
  - and interaction 203-18
  - and language background 59
  - and literacy 208, 209
  - and power structures *see*
  - autonomy: political
  - and self-directed learning 3-4
  - and technology 35-36, 58, 201, 211-18; *see also* technology
  - as a central human characteristic 201, 203, 218
  - as a characterisitic of successful learning 204
  - attitudes towards 44, 80, 85
  - concepts of 27-34
  - conscious/unconscious 208
  - constraints on 201, 204
  - criteria/approaches for developing 20-1, 35-48, 115, 203, 213, 218
  - definitions 2-4, 6, 15, 29, 30, 37, 50, 150, 203-4
  - degrees/extent of 3-4, 9, 13, 26, 150
  - development of 163

- in formal institutions 5, 9, 16-17, 21-6, 34, 38, 77, 84, 86, 89, 115-32, 143, 204, 208-10, 249, 265-80
  - linguistic 33, 34
  - mainstreaming of 2, 10, 28, 149, 152
  - personal 3, 27, 50, 52, 218
  - political 6, 10, 27-34, 50
  - psychological/individual 6, 10, 20-1, 28, 30, 33, 52, 97, 104, 204-6
  - social 6, 30, 33, 34, 205-6, 207
  - subject-matter *see* autonomy: linguistic
  - use of the concept 47, 48
- Bachman & Palmer 135
- Bacon 80, 87, 88; & Finnemann 169, 170
- Bailey 63
- Baker & Jones 80
- Balla et al. 51, 54
- Ballard & Clanchy 85
- Bannister & Fransella 263
- Bare 117
- Barnes 206, 207, 267
- de Bary 46
- Beatty 117
- Belkin 111
- Benesch 31
- Benson 6
- Berry 234
- Bhatia 234
- Bickley 263
- Biggs 53
- Blanche & Merino 167
- Block 167, 170
- Blue 167
- Boekarts 88
- Bolt 237
- Bolton 96, 97
- Boud 50
- Brindley 26, 62
- Brockett & Hiemstra 5
- Brookes & Grundy 1, 256
- Brookfield 3, 5, 28, 32
- Brown et al. 149, 153
- Bruner 40, 42, 43, 206, 207, 208, 210, 254
- Burke 255
- Bush & Crotty 222, 223
- business 235
- CALL (computer-assisted language learning) *see* technology
- Candy 3, 8, 31, 33
- Carkhuff 111
- Carvalho 219
- catalogue 41, 179; *see also* materials: classification of
- Cathcart & Vaughn 14
- Chan & Hui 52
- Chapelle 281; & Mizuno 282
- Chiang 55
- child language acquisition *see* language acquisition
- child rearing 205-6
- Ch'ingtsze 55-6
- choice 10, 39-40, 100, 104, 185; *see also under* materials
- Chomsky 38
- Chu Hsi 56
- Clarke 133, 169
- classification *see* materials: classification of
- classroom learning 9, 13-26, 29-30, 54, 89, 106, 160-1, 206-8, 209, 267, 268-80; *see also* autonomy in formal institutions, education system: levels,

- learners: level
- Cobb & Stevens 282
- cognitive strategies/awareness
  - 154-8, 161-4; *see also* language awareness
- Cohen & Manion 68
- collaborative learning *see* interaction
- communication
  - in the classroom/self-access centre 19-20, 192, 206-7, 209-10
  - outside the classroom 20, 206-7, 216-17
  - strategies 192, 193, 197
- communicative methodology 2; *see also under* materials
- computers *see* technology
- confidence 17, 73-4, 75, 83, 87, 107-8, 110-11, 123, 124, 134, 144, 145, 148, 190-1, 193, 194-5, 222, 231, 232
- Confucius/Confucian ethics 49, 51, 56, 88
- constructivist approaches 31; *see also* knowledge
- contracts 61, 79, 102-3, 117
- control of the learning process 3, 10, 31-2, 37-8, 43, 47, 51-2, 53-4, 59, 60, 61, 73-4, 75, 77, 84, 102, 115, 143, 145, 160, 194-5, 204, 212, 213, 216, 232, 238, 282; *see also* self-directed learning
- conversation *see* communication, dialogue, interaction, negotiation
- conversation exchange 44, 60, 115-32; *see also* e-mail pen pals
- Cooper et al. 219
- Corder 193
- corpora 239-40, 243, 272, 283, 285-6
- Council of Europe 29, 35
- counselling 42-3, 44, 52, 58, 60, 89, 93-113, 253-4
- countries/continents/regions *see also under* education system, learners
  - Australia 16, 17, 61, 77
  - Canada 52
  - China 46, 108-9
  - Europe 9, 11, 35
  - France 41, 109-11, 159
  - Germany 117, 270
  - Greece 50
  - Hong Kong 11, 44, 51-2, 54, 121
  - Ireland 117
  - Japan 17
  - New Zealand 19
  - North America 27, 28
  - Oman 283
  - Singapore 19, 98, 108, 165
  - South Africa 33
  - South-east Asia 5-6
  - Spain 117
  - UK 36-48, 117, 135
  - USA 3, 18, 85, 117, 134, 135
- Coupland et al. 264
- critical pedagogy 10, 28, 31-3
- culture *see under* autonomy, learners
  - creation 207, 210
- curriculum *see* syllabus
- Dalwood 117
- Dam 1, 5, 6, 280; & Gabrielsen 5, 16
- Darwin 37
- data collection 260-1, 281-2, 283, 299-300; *see also* research methodology
  - diaries 63-8, 71-2
  - field notes 63-8, 72
  - interviews 63ff
  - learners as ethnographers 18

- questionnaires/rating scales
  - 90-1, 131-2, 174, 190-1
    - SILL questionnaire 63, 64, 68-70, 74-5
  - recording computer key presses 282, 286
  - tape-recording 65, 262
- Davidson & Henning 88
- Dearden 50
- deep learning *see* learning approaches
- definitions *see under* autonomy, learner training, self-directed learning
- dialogue 42, 105, 106, 207, 210, 213; *see also* interaction
- Dickinson 1, 2, 3, 78, 116, 167, 170, 179, 219, 256
- distance learning 2
- Duda & Riley 263
- Duffy et al. 149, 154
- Dunkel 281
- Eck et al. 209, 217
- Edmondson et al. 295
- education system
  - levels *see also* learners: level
    - primary 51
    - secondary 51, 54
    - tertiary 51, 54, 78-9, 85, 98
    - adult 3, 5, 27, 28, 57, 61, 93, 116
  - countries/regions *see also* countries/continents/regions
    - Asian 86-7
    - British 51
    - Canadian 52
    - Chinese 55, 56
    - German 266, 270
    - Hong Kong 51-2, 53-5
- Egan 94, 97
- Ellis, G. & Sinclair 1, 14, 75, 106, 149, 151, 152, 158, 160, 161, 167
- Ellis, R. 263
- e-mail pen pals 44, 217; *see also* technology: internet
- empowerment 75, 111; *see also* autonomy: political, control of the learning process
- Engels et al. 272
- engineering 19, 45-6, 58, 98
- Entwistle 73; & Ramsden 53
- Esch 1; *see* Harding & Tealby, Harding-Esch
- ethnocentrism 11, 40, 261; *see also* autonomy and culture
- evaluation
  - of language programmes/learner support systems 62
  - of learner autonomy 249
  - of learning 20, 61-2, 64, 66-7, 69-72, 79, 103, 123, 153, 163-4, 204; *see also* assessment, learning strategies
- Evans 2
- Eveland 117, 120
- Exum & Lau 52
- Fairclough 47
- Feldman & Rosenthal 52
- Feldmann & Stemmer 281
- flexibility 10, 40, 185
- flexible learning 2
- Fok 135
- Foucault 253
- Frankel 167, 168
- Galloway & Labarca 77, 88
- Galton & Binet 258
- Gaonac'h 263
- Gardner, D. 185, 219, 220, 222, 223; & Miller 1, 264

- Gardner, H. 254  
 Garner 54  
 Garrison 28, 33  
 Gathercole 1  
 Geddes & Sturtridge 1, 219  
 Geddes et al. 156  
 gender *see* learners: gender  
 Gerrard 236, 237  
 Gibbs 50  
 Giles & St. Clair 263  
 Glisan & Drescher 170  
 Glynn et al. 234  
 goals 78, 101-3  
 Goodman 282  
 Goody 208  
 Gow & Kember 54  
 Gow et al. 53, 54  
 Grabe 282  
 grammar *see* language skills  
 Gremmo & Riley 5, 8  
 Grotjahn 62  
 group learning 17, 47, 89, 185-200,  
 213-16, 246; *see also* autonomy:  
 social, conversation exchange,  
 interaction, pairwork  
  
 Habermas 33  
 Hall 19, 20  
 Halliday 234  
 Hammond & Collins 28, 32  
 Harding & Tealby 116  
 Harding-Esch 1, 93  
 Harris 117  
 Hatano & Inagaki 77  
 Haughton & Dickinson 135, 144  
 Hayes & Flower 234, 235, 236  
 Heath 18  
 Hein 264  
 Helmore 67  
 helper *see* counselling  
 Henner-Stanchina 117  
  
 Higgins 212, 239  
 Hill 167, 168, 186  
 Ho & Crookall 6  
 Hoey 234  
 Holec 1, 3, 4, 6, 10, 15, 29, 37, 58,  
 63, 73, 75, 93, 150, 163, 204, 263  
 Holland & Quinn 263, 264  
 Holmes 193  
 Howe & Eisenhart 252, 259, 261  
 Hsu 46  
 Hughes 167  
 humanism/humanistic  
 approaches 60, 93, 97, 150  
 Hutchinson 266  
 Hyde & Linn 88  
  
 Ignatieff 218  
 Illich 206  
 individualized instruction 2  
 Ingram & Wiley 63  
 interaction 6, 10, 19-20, 41, 42-3, 44,  
 134, 148, 193, 201, 203, 204-7,  
 211, 212-18; *see also*  
 communication, dialogue,  
 group learning, negotiation  
 internet *see* technology  
  
 Jacobs 134, 146  
 Jaeger 264  
 Jin & Cortazzi 46  
 Jodelet 263  
 Johns 213, 216, 234  
 Jones, J. 6  
 Jones, L. 172  
 Jones, R.L. 143  
 Jonz 282  
  
 Karmiloff-Smith 205, 208  
 Kelly, G. 254, 263  
 Kelly, J. 80  
 Kember & Gow 54

- Kleinmann 282  
 knowledge, integration of 207, 267-8, 280; *see also* constructivist approaches  
 Knowles 78, 93  
 Kolb 254  
 Krippendorff 63  
 Kumaravadivelu 18, 80
- L1, use of 187, 191, 193  
 L2, use of 210  
 Laine 263  
 Lambert & Hart 223
- language  
   acquisition  
     first language acquisition  
       201, 204-6, 208-9  
     second language  
       acquisition 201, 208-12, 249, 263, 274  
   and sense of self 210  
   awareness 18, 60, 105, 108-10, 185-6, 205, 209-10, 213, 247, 280  
   exchange *see* conversation  
   exchange  
   learning 209, 217, 218  
   skills 9, 10, 161-3  
     grammar 178, 236, 243  
     listening 86, 106-7, 191  
     pronunciation 102, 123  
     reading 155-8, 164, 182, 282, 285-6  
     speaking 20, 86, 87, 107-9, 123, 135-7, 146, 148, 178, 182-4, 185-200; *see also* conversation exchange  
     vocabulary acquisition 19-20, 67, 68, 73, 102, 123, 187, 192-3, 236, 240, 242, 243, 245, 249, 265-80  
     writing 18-19, 86, 87, 134-5, 146, 213-14, 216-17, 233-48  
     use 209, 217, 218; *see also* learning by doing  
   language-learning awareness *see* metacognitive strategies / awareness  
   languages *see also* autonomy and language background  
     Chinese 81  
       Cantonese 118-26  
       characters 80, 86  
       Mandarin/Putonghua 105, 106-10, 118-22  
     English 33, 61, 98-105, 108-9, 117, 118-22, 142, 149, 152, 157, 158, 172-3, 187, 244, 256, 266, 269-80, 283  
       EAP 20, 235  
       EFL 16-19, 233, 236-7, 243  
       ESL 16-19, 59, 63, 85, 117, 135-6, 142, 146  
       ESP 93, 235  
     Japanese 59, 77-91  
     Spanish 202, 224-5
- Last 234  
 Laurillard 223
- learner  
   beliefs 85, 94, 260  
   needs 16, 17-18, 21-3, 42, 78, 162, 271; *see also* needs analysis  
   styles 16, 21, 51-2, 85, 86, 89, 162, 186, 254, 263, 275; *see also* learning strategies  
   training 10, 24, 30, 31, 34, 42-3, 59, 61-2, 63, 67, 73, 75, 94, 106, 123, 126, 144, 145, 149, 150-1, 153, 160-1, 167; *see also* learning how to learn, learning strategies, materials: learner training  
     definition 151



- learner-centred learning 9, 13-26,  
 60, 77, 79, 84, 93, 133, 144  
 learners  
   culture/nationality *see also*  
   autonomy and culture  
     Algerian 19  
     American 52, 117  
     Asian 5-6, 85-8  
     Australian 52, 54, 80, 82-3,  
       86, 89  
     British 117  
     Canadian 52  
     Chinese 11, 16, 46, 51-2, 54-  
       8, 80, 82-90, 243  
     Danish 16-17, 266  
     French 117, 266  
     German 117  
     Hong Kong 11, 49-55, 81,  
       121, 135, 136, 142, 172, 186,  
       224, 233, 236, 242, 244  
     Japanese 105, 107-11, 120,  
       122  
     Korean 80, 82-3, 85, 87-90  
     Omani 283  
     Singaporean 101-3, 105-10,  
       160  
   gender 80, 82-3, 87-8  
   individual differences 16, 20,  
   56  
   language background 80  
   level  
     primary 5, 16-17, 51  
     secondary 5, 16, 17, 18-20,  
       51, 249-50, 265-80  
     tertiary 17-18, 20, 51, 52, 54,  
       57, 60, 77-91, 98-113, 116-17,  
       133-46, 172-9, 186-200, 224-  
       32, 233, 234, 236, 283  
     adult 5, 16, 57, 59, 61-75, 80,  
       105-11, 116, 160, 165  
   proficiency 123, 147, 175-6, 178-  
     9, 202, 220  
 learning  
   and society 207  
   approaches 34, 53-5, 73, 186  
   by doing 10, 42-3, 60, 161, 201,  
     210, 217  
   how to learn 3, 42, 60, 73, 75,  
     105-6, 150-1, 169; *see also*  
   learner training, learning-  
   centred learning,  
   metacognitive strategies/  
   awareness  
   life-long 78  
   programmes 61-75, 165  
   projects 77-91, 98-105, 136-46,  
     148, 185-200  
   strategies 9, 16, 30, 51, 53, 54,  
     59, 60, 61-76, 77, 78, 80, 105-8,  
     153, 154, 161, 163-4, 167, 275;  
   *see also* learning how to learn,  
   cognitive strategies/  
   awareness, metacognitive  
   strategies/awareness  
   styles *see* learner styles  
   tasks 20, 21, 53, 78, 86, 89, 147,  
     149, 153-9, 161-5, 171, 172-3,  
     176-9, 180, 247; *see also*  
   materials  
 learning-centred learning 9, 14-15  
 LeBlanc & Painchaud 88  
 Lee Kuan Yew 88  
 Legenhausen 280; & Wolff 209,  
   210, 211, 214  
 Levin 253  
 Lewis 2  
 librarian 40-1  
 Lieven 206  
 Lim 19  
 listening *see* language skills  
 Little 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 27, 28, 29, 37, 58,  
   117, 188, 204, 215, 221, 239; &

- Davis 215  
 Littlejohn 133, 143  
 Lockhart & Ng 134, 146  
 Logan 2  
 logsheets 25, 103-4, 163; *see also*  
     monitoring  
 Lonergan 219, 221  
 Lowe 263  
 Lu Hsiang-shan 49  
 Lu Tung-lai 56  
 Lublin 144
- MacCargar 80, 85  
 Maher 254  
 Mann & Thompson 234  
 Mannheim 252  
 Marsh et al. 88  
 Marton & Säljö 53  
 Maslow 97  
 Mason 1  
 materials *see also* learning tasks  
     and publishers' needs 155, 157  
     and self-direction 160, 168, 170  
     authentic 2, 39-40, 147, 148,  
     161-3, 169-84, 215, 219, 221-3,  
     239-40, 243-4, 245, 283  
     choice of 39-40, 148, 185  
     classification of 40-1, 43, 179  
     communicative 172-3, 176-8  
     control of 32  
     design 9, 148, 149-65, 167, 180,  
     271  
     film/video 148, 185-200, 202,  
     215, 221-2; *see also under*  
     technology  
     generic guidelines/tasks for  
     use of 148, 180, 182-4, 187  
     learner-created 180-1, 269-70  
     learner-training 24-5, 147, 149-  
     65  
     modifiability of 10, 41  
     organization of 147, 161-3  
     self-access 39-41, 161-5, 167-84  
     specific tasks for 188, 196  
     structural 173, 176-8  
     textbook/pedagogic 39, 147,  
     152, 153-5, 170-9, 221-3, 270-4  
 mathematics 19, 58  
 May 97  
 McCall 219  
 McMullen 85  
 Melton 86, 89  
 metacognitive strategies/  
     awareness 42, 61-76, 80, 105-8,  
     161-2, 204, 209-10, 211-12, 214,  
     218; *see also* learning strategies,  
     learning how to learn  
 methodology *see* research, data  
     collection  
 Mezirow 31  
 Miller 93; & Gardner 133  
 Milton & Chowdury 242  
 Milton & Tsang 236  
 Mittan 134, 146  
 monitoring 21, 24-5, 61-2, 64, 79,  
     123, 163, 180, 185; *see also*  
     logsheets  
 Montaigne 73  
 Moore 219  
 motivation 44, 53-4, 75, 98, 144-5,  
     168, 201, 263  
 Müller et al. 117  
 Munby 93  
 Murphey 117, 118, 120, 128  
 Murphy, D. 51  
 Murphy, R. 173
- needs analysis 21-3, 93, 101-2; *see*  
     *also* learner needs  
 negotiation 10, 18, 42-3, 60, 125,  
     126, 133, 195, 207-8, 211, 213,  
     215, 216, 267-8

- Newell 204  
 Nolan 5  
 Nunan 16, 20, 23, 24, 93, 180  
 Nydahl 239  
 Nyikos 80  
  
 objectives *see* goals  
 O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis 103  
 O'Malley & Chamot 75, 106, 152, 167  
 O'Malley et al. 162  
 open learning 2  
 Oskarsson 167  
 Oxford 63, 64, 70, 73, 74, 75, 80, 88, 105, 149, 152  
  
 Page 1, 2  
 pairwork 19-20; *see also* group learning  
 Parnwell 269  
 Pask 53  
 Pederson 282  
 peers *see* assessment, conversation exchange, group learning, interaction, negotiation  
 Pelto 264  
 Pennington 237, 238, 247  
 Pennycook 31  
 Perfetti 282  
 Pierce 31, 32, 33  
 planning 61-2, 64, 66-7, 72, 74, 79, 103, 204; *see also* learning strategies  
 politics *see* autonomy: political  
 Potter & Wetherell 263  
 primary schools *see* education system, learners: level  
 programmed learning 10, 36, 38, 47-8  
 pronunciation *see* language skills  
  
 Qian 57  
  
 reading *see* language skills  
 record-keeping *see* logsheets, monitoring  
 reflection 10, 20, 21, 24-5, 42-3, 67, 106, 161, 163, 201, 208, 209-10, 211, 213, 216, 217  
 research *see also* data collection and autonomy/self-directed learning/self-access learning 1, 249-50, 256, 264  
     future research 8, 146  
     methodology/approach 59, 62, 249-50, 251-64  
 resources 10, 32, 93; *see also* materials  
 Rheingold 216  
 Richards 170, 272  
 Riley 1, 5, 58, 254, 256, 263, 264  
 Riley et al. 115  
 Robinson Crusoe 47  
 Rogers, C. 97  
 Rubin 64; & Henze 68  
  
 Sanguinetti 80  
 satellite TV *see* technology  
 Sato 80  
 Scarella & Oxford 14  
 Scardamalia et al. 217  
 Schank & Birnbaum 38  
 Schmitt-Gevers 263, 264  
 schools *see* autonomy in formal institutions, education: levels  
 Schumann 46  
 Schütz 252  
 Schwartz 37  
 science 58, 235  
 Scollon & Scollon 253  
 secondary schools *see* education system, learners: level

- self, sense of 210, 253
- self-access centres/self-access
  - language learning 2-3, 6, 32, 35-48, 93-113, 133, 147, 148, 159-65, 167-84, 185-200, 212-13, 215-16, 219-32, 233, 249, 250, 253-6, 264, 281-302
  - Cambridge University Language Centre, UK 39-44, 116
  - The Chinese University of Hong Kong Independent Learning Centre 49, 57-8
  - CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues), Université de Nancy II, France 5, 29, 117
  - English International, Lyon, France 159
  - Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Self-Access Centre 186-200
  - Sultan Qaboos University Student Resource Centre, Oman 283-4
  - Temasek Polytechnic Centre for Individual Language Learning, Singapore 98-113
  - Trinity College Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Dublin, Ireland 117, 215-16
  - University of Hong Kong Self-Access Centre 115-32
- self-directed learning 27, 28, 59, 74, 77-91, 94, 115-32, 160, 256; *see also* autonomy, control of the learning process, materials and autonomy 3-4 concepts 3
  - definitions 3, 78
  - support for 10, 38-46, 116, 125-6, 159-64, 168-9, 178, 202, 205-8, 210, 211-18, 219-32, 233, 237-48, 250, 267-70, 281-302; *see also* counselling
- self-esteem 87-8, 148; *see also* confidence
- self-instruction 2, 33
- self-management 3, 105, 110-11; *see* control of the learning process
- sex *see* learners: gender
- Sharples 234; & Pemberton 239
- Sharwood-Smith 40
- Sheerin 167, 219
- Sinclair, B. & Ellis 149, 152
- Sinclair, J. 240
- Sinha & Kao 80, 89
- Skehan 8
- Slimani 19
- Smith 282
- Soars & Soars 156
- social interaction *see* interaction, negotiation, autonomy: social
- software *see* technology
- Spaventa & Williamson 134, 142
- speaking *see* language skills
- Stern 205
- Stevens 215, 281, 284, 296; & Millmore 283
- strategies *see* learning strategies, cognitive strategies/awareness, metacognitive strategies/awareness
- Sturtridge 167, 168, 169
- Swales 234
- surface learning *see* learning approaches
- syllabus 9, 21, 78, 79, 133; *see also* learner needs

- Tarone & Yule 85  
 Tarone et al. 236  
 tasks *see* learning tasks  
 Taxdal 117  
 teachers  
     education/training of 151-2  
     learner beliefs about 52, 85, 178  
     role of 9, 17, 18, 34, 51, 52, 58,  
     59-60, 85, 94, 111-12, 160-1, 178,  
     216; *see also* classroom learning,  
     counselling  
 technology 10, 35-6, 58, 93, 112; *see*  
     *also* autonomy and technology  
     computers 201, 211, 218  
         CALL (computer-assisted  
         language learning)  
         software 201-2, 212-14, 215,  
         234, 239, 247, 250, 264, 281-  
         302; *see also* interactive  
         video *below*  
             concordancing 213  
             *Hangman-in-Context*  
             283, 284-5, 295-6  
             *Storyboard* 212-13  
             *SuperCloze* 283-302  
         grammar checkers 237, 243  
         text-editing software 235,  
         237-48  
         word processors 213-14,  
         233, 237, 239, 242  
     interactive video 201-2, 215-16,  
     219-32  
         *Autotutor* 201, 215-16  
     internet 201, 211, 216-17; *see*  
     *also* e-mail pen pals  
     multimedia networks 43  
     satellite TV 39-40  
     video 17, 185, 219; *see also*  
     materials  
 tertiary education *see* education  
     system, learners: level  
 testing *see* assessment  
     of IQ 258  
     placement 134  
 text analysis/linguistics 234-5  
 textbooks/texts *see* materials  
 Tharp & Gallimore 207, 210  
 Thomson 89  
 Tizard & Hughes 206  
 Tomalin 219  
 Tough 5, 116  
 Trevarthen 205  
 Trim 37, 38, 263  
 Trotsky 38  
 TV *see* technology  
 Tyacke 73, 75  
  
 user's guide 40  
  
 video *see* materials, technology  
 vocabulary acquisition *see*  
     language skills  
 Vygotsky 211, 214, 216  
  
 Waxer 52  
 Wells 205, 206, 207  
 Wenden 1, 28, 29, 30, 75, 80, 87,  
     106, 149, 151, 152, 153, 154; &  
     Rubin 1, 106, 152  
 West 272  
 Widdows & Voller 17  
 Widdowson 169, 171  
 Willing 1, 6, 16, 152  
 Windeatt 281, 295  
 Wode 274  
 Wong Yan-min 55  
 Woolgar 261  
 word processing *see* technology  
 World Wide Web *see* technology:  
     internet  
 writing *see* language skills  
  
 Yee 51  
 Young, Lord 47  
 Young, R. 89