Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning

Phil Benson and Peter Voller

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General Editor's Preface

It might be worthwhile setting out a couple of more or less folk assertions as a way in to reading this provocative but informing book. The first, in Mrs Thatcher's (in)famous phrase, is the assertion that: '*There's no such thing as society*', and the second is, as every (language) teacher knows (and sometimes says), '*I can't learn it for you*'. The answers, of course, are: 'there is', and 'you're right'. The point is that for language learning *both* answers are right, it depends on what you're focusing on, and it's also a question of ends and means.

One way of regarding the title of this book is, then, to see it as containing the ultimate tautology; how could there be language learning which wasn't 'autonomous' and 'independent'? In that sense the title might as well be just *Language Learning*. However, if as good pupils of Paul Grice we engage with the Cooperative Principle, we are bound to reflect that to write and print such an apparently tautologous title must contain the implicature of some other meaning. Maybe, language learning isn't autonomous and it isn't independent? Is it or was it for you? That's when the title starts to get interesting and sets you off on the quest. It's probably the best way to start to read Phil Benson's and Peter Voller's timely and challenging collection of original papers from about the most representative and expert group of writers on this theme as one might assemble, and the *Applied Linguistics and Language Study* series is very much in their debt for the idea and for the accomplishment. At the risk of too great a series self-promotion, *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* is set to become a classic in applied linguistics.

The editors, like Deep Throat in Watergate, have got it right for the reader: don't follow the money, but follow Holec's five definitional principles for autonomy in language learning: assess the conduciveness of the *situations* (the contexts of learning), the *skills* learners need to refine and develop, the *capacity* or ability that needs to be enhanced, the *responsibility* that needs to be encouraged and the *rights* to learn that need to be asserted. More interestingly, though, consider how each of these acts as a corroboration and also a control on each of the others. If the focus is on context, then the issue of rights immediately engages us in the degree of control the learner can and is allowed to exercise on what she learns, when and how she learns, and how she comes to assess and evaluate the success of her learning; if the focus is on rights, then the issue of responsible exercise of those rights is foregrounded, itself dependent on the missing element (though subsumed) in Holec's list: the *content* of what she learns, necessarily dependent on the degree of language learning skill the learner has been enabled to acquire, and the conduciveness of the contexts of learning. Such skills are, of course, only epiphenomena for learning; what is essential is the enhancement of capacity, that development of cognitive and communicative ability which is itself ineluctably bound up with the recognition by the curriculum of both social and individual aspects of learning.

This perspective of internal validation, autonomy and independence provides a further way of reading the arguments of this book. The Parts and their papers offer a similar and supportive mutually corroborative opportunity. Part Three, with its focus on *Methods and Materials* is challenged by the *Philosophy and Practice* of Part One, mediated by the exercise of participant action characterised by the *Roles and Relationships* of Part Two. In this way, the book takes on a curriculum-defining shape, a critical and reflexive approach to its own subject matter, and the individual papers themselves offer similarly contestable positions when set against each other. Phil Benson and Peter Voller have by this means carefully constructed and achieved an interactive and thus an interpretive but also an explanatory analysis of their subject matter.

More than this, however, the book itself provides an example of how any language learning curriculum that has autonomy and independence as its goal (and which curriculum would not?) needs to provide within itself the sources for its own internal debate; about curriculum content, curriculum process and curriculum evaluation. Autonomy cannot be legislated, independence cannot be wished, in the curriculum as anywhere else in the social polity;

what can be done is to embed their defining principles in the actions of teachers and learners and make such actions not only open for reasoned choice by both, but, much more importantly, to establish the philosophical, purposeful and language acquisitional bases of such choices themselves as part of the subject-matter of the curriculum. After all, deciding what is to be done and why is one of the few genuinely communicative acts any classroom can encourage.

At a risk, then, of distilling the debates of these invigorating papers to their essence, we might (to entangle metaphors) unravel and deconstruct the struggling branches of the tree that marks so appositely the cover of this book. The contesting discourses of the individual and the social are not, ultimately, to be resolved in some bland and homegenised interdiscursivity, neither for learning, nor for language. If learning, despite Mrs Thatcher's maxim, requires the society of other learners, real or virtual, for its successful engendering, language and communication certainly do. Insofar as successful learning requires negotiation by the learner of what she already knows in the face of and in the light of the new, so too does communication. In that sense exploring the meaning potential of utterances is itself a learning as well as a communicative act. The question is how that exploration and that negotiation can be made the mainspring of any curriculum, whether institutionalised or personalised. Achieving autonomy and independence is a matter for the curriculum, not just for the learner or the teacher. But it can never be unattached from its contexts, never cut and dried in cyberspace.

It is perhaps worthwhile remembering that the chief mainsprings to what came, unfortunately perhaps, to be called communicative language teaching are all closely allied to the principles of autonomy and independence outlined here, but with two closely linked differences, one of focus, the other of principle. The difference of principle was that of emphasising *inter*dependence, not just independence in language learning: interdependence of learners, learners and teachers, learners and data, learners and contexts and goals of learning. The difference of focus was that of the central position of *language* as communication, for me the key and perhaps too covertly naturalised construct in these pages, where the goal of the curriculum was to enable and empower learners to make their own meanings. In this sense, the pathways, modes and strategies are less important than the goal: if interdependence

can be fostered, and language as meaning potential made the central curriculum principle, then autonomy is how the individual learner (and the teacher) comes to learns *it* for himself and herself, where *it* is both learning and communication, as well as the value of an interdependent autonomy, in language, learning, and, above all else, in living. The how is locally constructable, the why inalienable.

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Introduction: autonomy and independence in language learning

PHIL BENSON AND PETER VOLLER

Aims

Over the last two decades, *autonomy* and *independence* have taken on a growing importance in the field of language education. David Little (1991: p.2) has described autonomy as a 'buzz-word' of the 1990s, and this is borne out by the number of recent books (Dam, 1995; Dickinson and Wenden, 1995; van Lier, 1995), international conferences (Esch, 1994; Gardner and Miller, 1994; Pemberton *et al.*, 1996) and newsletters (*Independence*; *Learner Autonomy in Language Learning*; *Learning Learning*) connected to the topic. Anita Wenden (1991: p.11) states that 'few teachers will disagree with the importance of helping language learners become more autonomous as learners', but concepts with which we can hardly disagree are often those that stand most in need of clarification. In spite of widespread agreement on the importance of autonomy and independence, there remains a good deal of uncertainty about their meanings and applications for language education. It is the aim of this book both to clarify and to problematize these meanings, in order that they might be opened up to wider debate.

For a definition of autonomy, we might turn to Holec (1981: p.3) who describes it as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning'. In language education, however, the word has been used in at least five different ways:

1. for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;

4. for the exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning;
5. for the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

There are also differences in the extent to which autonomy is seen as a property of individuals or of social groups: it can be thought of in terms of withdrawal from education as a social process (self-instruction), or in terms of redistribution of power among participants in that social process (learner control). There are differences in the place that autonomy occupies in language learning: it can be thought of both as a means to the end of more effective language learning (autonomy for language learning) or as an end of language learning itself (language learning for autonomy). To add to the uncertainty, 'independence' is used sometimes as a synonym for 'autonomy' (Sheerin, 1991) and sometimes with a distinct sense of its own. Dickinson (1992), for example, associates 'autonomy' with the idea of learning alone and 'independence' with active responsibility for one's own learning. There are also questions about whether autonomy and independence are universal or western culture-bound values in education (Riley, 1988a).

It should be emphasized that there is no canon for concepts such as autonomy and independence in the field of applied linguistics. These are problematic concepts because they carry with them meanings from other discourses and from their applications in particular instances of language education. Because different usages relate to different underlying perspectives, it is unlikely that applied linguists will arrive at single agreed definitions of these terms. In spite of this, there has been surprisingly little debate on the fundamentals of autonomy and independence as concepts in the field of applied linguistics. It is almost as if we have skipped over the debate on what autonomy and independence mean in our haste to move more rapidly on to their implementation. But whenever autonomy and independence figure in concrete language education projects, there is always a risk that underlying conceptual differences will emerge in the form of conflicts over the practical steps to be taken.

This lack of concern with theory and the dangers this has for practice is the primary concern of this book. The three parts of the book reflect the major questions that need to be addressed if the gap between theory and practice is to be narrowed. These questions are: What kinds of autonomy or independence are aimed

at and how can they best be achieved (*Part I: Philosophy and practice*)? What changes are envisaged in the roles and relationships of teachers and learners (*Part II: Roles and relationships*)? What specific methods and materials might best contribute to overall goals (*Part III: Methods and materials*)? When discussion of goals, rationales, and appropriate methodologies is informed by a deeper understanding of the meaning potential of autonomy and independence for language learning, the chances of successful implementation will be increased.

The aim of this book is to explore the discourses and applications of autonomy and independence for language learning and clarify where the concepts have come from and where they are going. Its overall message is that autonomy and independence are not simply totems whose evocation can automatically produce 'better language learners' or 'better people' as a result of language learning. It aims to show that there are different *versions* of autonomy and independence and different ways of implementing them, and that each way leads into fields of debate where widely accepted assumptions about language teaching and language learning are open to question.

The chapters that make up the book are based on their authors' experiences of autonomous and independent learning projects in a variety of settings. The authors do not always share the same view of autonomy and independence nor do they necessarily agree on the means of achieving it. In some cases, they are critical of methods and approaches with which they are themselves closely associated. The book does not, therefore, simply aim to promote autonomy and independence in language learning (although the editors are certainly committed to that goal), but to hold these concepts up to critical scrutiny at a time when they are entering the mainstream of language education. In this introductory chapter, we would like briefly to map out the terrain so that readers will better understand why autonomy and independence are so important to language education at the present time.

The origins of autonomy and independence in language learning

Although autonomy and independence have deep historical roots in both western and eastern philosophies (see Pierson, 1996, on the

concept of autonomy in Chinese thought), it is primarily in their western form that we know of them in language education. Autonomy and independence are keywords of twentieth-century liberal western thought in the fields of philosophy, psychology, politics and education. From the eighteenth century onwards, western discourses on society have increasingly emphasized the responsibility of the individual as social agent. In philosophy and psychology, autonomy and independence have come to be associated with the capacity of the individual to act as a responsible 'member of society'. The autonomous individual is, in Rogers's (1969: p.288) words, 'a fully functioning person'. In education, autonomy and independence are associated with the formation of the individual as the core of a democratic society. In this sense, they are by no means radical educational concepts. As Boud (1988: p.18) points out: 'A fundamental purpose of education is assumed to be to develop in individuals the ability to make their own decisions about what they think and do.' The notion of individual autonomy has a certain ambiguity, however, because it implies both responsibility and freedom from constraint. In *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*, one definition of *autonomy* is 'the ability to make your own decisions about what to do rather than being influenced by someone else or told what to do', a definition somewhat ominously illustrated by the phrase: *These parents see autonomy in their youngsters as a threat.* The word *independence* has a similar ambiguity, implying both individual responsibility (independence in a growing child, for example, denotes doing what the family expects without being told to do so) and freedom from reliance on others (an 'independent woman', a person of 'independent means').

A second, and older, sense of autonomy is found in the political field, where it denotes freedom from external control. This is the other sense of autonomy defined by *Collins COBUILD Dictionary*: 'the control or government of a country, organization, or group by itself rather than by others' (illustrated even more ominously by the phrase: *The proposals include the ending of university autonomy*). Unlike individual autonomy, political autonomy and independence are not conditional upon 'responsibility'. They are rights rather than capacities. As Kwame Nkrumah (late President of Ghana) once argued of political independence: 'The best way of learning to be an independent sovereign state is to be an independent sovereign state.' The dictionary example shows that, in the educational context, autonomy is something that institutions may or may not

enjoy in relation to governments or other funding institutions. In radical educational theory, autonomy, in the political sense, is a product of socially liberating education. In the work of Illich (1971), for example, the objective is to liberate learning from the restrictions of 'schooling'. In the work of Freire (1970), it is to help learners develop tools for engagement in social struggle. In these contexts, autonomy has a more radical, social content concerned not only with the psychological autonomy of the individual, but also with the autonomy of individuals as they are constituted within social groups.

Although autonomy and independence in language learning currently tend to be conceived in individual and psychological terms, we should bear in mind that the roots of these concepts are both contradictory and complex. We should bear in mind also that those who have done most to develop and popularize these notions were often inspired by the radical educational ideas of Freire, Illich, Châlon, Dewey, Kilpatrick and others. As John Trim (cited in Holec, 1988: p.6) stated in a report on modern language teaching to the Council of Europe the autonomy approach is both 'learner-centred' and 'anti-authoritarian'. Its implementation is therefore often characterized by ambiguities arising from two basic tensions: on the one hand, between responsibility and freedom from constraint; and on the other, between the individual and the social.

Why language learning? Why now?

The promotion of autonomy in language learning has links to developments elsewhere in the field of education (Boud, 1988; Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1971) and has been sustained and nourished by innovative work in the field of self-directed learning and self-access (for reports, see Dickinson, 1987; Esch, 1994; Gardner and Miller, 1994; Holec, 1988; Little *et al.*, 1989; Riley, 1985; for a historical view of the concept of autonomy in language learning, see Gremmo and Riley, 1995). For the 'real meaning' of autonomy and independence there is a tendency to look towards the European tradition represented at CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues), Nancy (Riley, 1985), but important as this work has been, we feel that it is also necessary to look at connections between these concepts and wider developments

in language education. The most important of these is the fact that there is far more language education taking place, in more varied circumstances and for a wider variety of purposes, than ever before. The languages of the economically developed western world, English especially, account for the largest proportion of this growth, and it is in connection with the teaching of these languages that the concepts of autonomy and independence have established strongest roots. In the face of the growing scale and complexity of language education, they have emerged as keywords for flexible approaches to teaching and learning and responsiveness to diverse needs and circumstances.

At the same time, autonomy and independence have become linked to the growing role of technology in education, a link which has supported the growth of self-access language learning. For language teaching institutions, self-access often appears to represent an economical solution to large-scale language learning needs, a solution which is justified pedagogically by its association with the keywords of autonomy and independence. For advocates of autonomy and independence also, these terms have often been inseparable from the practice of self-access. Yet there is a good deal of ambiguity in this relationship. Self-access language learning can easily lead to dependence on a narrow range of strategies and materials and a narrowing of perspectives. As many of the authors in this collection are at pains to demonstrate, there is no necessary link between learning a language in a self-access facility and the development of autonomy and independence.

Autonomy and independence in language learning are also supported by three related tendencies in language education: individualization, learner-centredness and a growing recognition of the political nature of language learning.

Autonomous language learning has long been associated with individualization (Geddes and Sturtridge, 1982; Brookes and Grundy, 1988), and the notion that learners each have their own preferred learning styles, capacities and needs (Skehan, 1989). Advocates of autonomy and independence have also drawn upon 'constructivist' approaches to learning, which suggest that learners construct their own systems of knowledge as experience is filtered through 'personal construct systems' (Little, 1991). Proponents of autonomous and independent learning have tended to distance themselves from the implication that they promote individualistic approaches to learning by emphasizing the collective or collaborative

nature of effective language learning. Autonomy continues, nevertheless, to be supported by views of learning which emphasize the learner's individuality. Concepts of autonomy and independence have also been promoted by the general trend in language education towards 'learner-centredness' over the last two decades (see, for example, Tarone and Yule, 1989). Learner-centredness is characterized by a movement away from language teaching as the transmission of a body of knowledge ('the language') towards language learning as the active production of knowledge. At the same time, there is tendency to focus on methods of learning rather than methods of teaching. Over the last decade, a number of learner-centred approaches to language education have emerged, all of which include autonomy and independence among their aims: the learner-centred curriculum (Nunan, 1988), the negotiated syllabus (Breen and Candlin, 1980; Bloor and Bloor, 1988), learner training (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Dickinson, 1992) and strategy training (Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991), the project-based syllabus (Legutke and Thomas, 1991), experiential and collaborative learning (Kohonen, 1992, Nunan, 1992), learner-based teaching (Campbell and Kryszewska, 1992), and so on. Autonomy and independence are, therefore, also supported by approaches that emphasize the role of learners as active agents in their own learning.

Lastly, there is the more recent tendency to emphasize the political element in language learning. Terms such as 'ideology' and 'empowerment' have entered the standard vocabulary of language education theory, and Marxist and post-Marxist theoreticians such as Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Gramsci and Althusser are becoming common figures in applied linguistics bibliographies. Behind this trend is a growing concern with the social implications of language learning and the development of critical approaches to language pedagogy (Pennycook, 1990; Fairclough, 1992b), leading to renewed interest in theories which link language education to social and political liberation. Recent work has also begun to look at the culturally invasive nature of much language education (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 1994; Pennycook, 1994), where issues of autonomy and independence are directly raised. In this case, it is not so much the autonomy of learners as individuals that is at issue, as the ways in which language education supports or threatens the autonomy of the social or cultural groups to which learners belong. This tendency to think

of learners not only as individuals but as members of socially constituted groups, adds a dimension to concepts of autonomy and independence for language learning which has yet to be fully explored.

Issues of debate

The various tendencies that have combined to produce more than one version of autonomy have also generated a number of areas for debate within the field. Here, we would like briefly to map out some of these areas and how they are addressed in this book. (Readers will find more detailed chapter summaries in the introductions to each of Parts I–III.)

One of the most important issues, arising from the more political approaches to language education, concerns the theoretical basis for autonomy and independence as concepts within the field. As we have observed, these concepts have roots in more than one discourse. In the late 1970s they were propelled by political concerns about the organization of educational systems, but in the 1980s psychological issues appear to have become dominant. In the mid-1990s, growing recognition that language education is a political process at both policy and content levels appears once again to be lending a political coloration to autonomy and independence. One of the key issues that is emerging in the field is how to reconcile psychological and political (and individual and social) perspectives in these concepts. These issues are addressed in several chapters (see especially, Chapters 2, 3, 7, 9, 11 and 12).

A closely related issue is the cultural specificity of autonomy and independence. Since Riley (1988a) first asked whether autonomy was not a peculiarly western concept, the question of whether the promotion of autonomy and independence in non-western settings is culturally intrusive or not has been on the agenda. This question is part of a broader set of issues concerned with the export of 'modern' teaching technologies from 'west' to 'east'. Recently, the British Council in Hong Kong has advertised Chinese-language courses for expatriate residents using 'native-speaker teachers and western methods'. The suggestion is that such methods are either intrinsically superior or intrinsically appropriate to 'western learners'. The 'superiority' of western methods and their appropriateness to non-western contexts is questionable, however (Kachru, 1991;

Holliday, 1994). One issue that arises is whether autonomy and independence in language learning embraces the right of learners to opt for methodologies that might be perceived negatively from the western learner-centred perspective. These issues are addressed directly in Chapter 3.

The link between autonomy and independence as broad principles of language education on the one hand and particular methods of implementing them on the other leads into a discussion of the role of self-access and self-instruction. Much of the literature on autonomy and independence in language learning has tended to assume that self-access and self-instruction are natural means for its implementation (Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1989; Sheerin, 1989). Yet there is very little evidence that self-instructional modes of learning are in themselves sufficient to lead to greater autonomy or independence. On the contrary, it appears that learners who are forced into self-instructional modes of learning without adequate support will tend to rely all the more on the directive element in the materials that they use. Doubt has been expressed in recent years about the effectiveness of self-access, and a number of the contributions to this book re-evaluate the relationship between self-access, self-instruction and autonomy in this light (Chapters 4, 5, 6). As in Part I, this theme is also prominent throughout the chapters in Part II, which stress the abiding importance of *teachers* in autonomous language learning, and those in Part III, which emphasize the need for open-ended methods and materials which actively involve learners in the development of their own autonomy.

In regard to the role of the teacher in autonomous language learning, the key issue is whether it is possible to 'teach' learners how to be autonomous without at the same time denying their autonomy. If not, does the teacher have any role to play other than to be a 'resource person' organizing facilities and providing opportunities for learning? If autonomy is identified exclusively with self-instruction, the role of the teacher does indeed seem to be under threat. However, changing roles in autonomous learning are closely bound up with changes in the distribution of power within the learning process. These changes raise problems of identity and adaptation for both teachers and learners, which are addressed in Chapters 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11.

Lastly, there is the issue of autonomy in a changing technological world. New educational technologies are often perceived

simultaneously as both a promise and a threat. The new technologies of language learning have tended to latch on to autonomy as one justification for their existence. Computer software for language learning is an example of a technology which claims to promote autonomy simply by offering the possibility of self-study. Such claims are often dubious, however, because of the limited range of options and roles offered to the learner. Nevertheless, technologies of education in the broadest sense (from the textbook to the computer) can be considered to be either more or less supportive of autonomy. The question is what kinds of criteria do we apply in evaluating them? This question is addressed particularly in Chapters 12 to 17, where a number of innovative approaches are described. Attention to the ideologies conveyed by self-instructional materials, and the authenticity and open-endedness of such materials are all emphasized.

Conclusion

It may be helpful if we conclude this introduction by returning to the 'mainstreaming' of autonomy and independence as a central theme of this book. From time to time, a new concept enters the field of language education as an alternative method or approach, but rapidly grows in significance to the point where it comes fundamentally to condition thinking throughout the field. Such was the case with Communicative Language Teaching (Breen and Candlin, 1980; Legutke and Thomas, 1991), which began life in the late 1960s as an alternative to 'structural' and 'grammar-translation' models of teaching, but rapidly became an axiom of language teaching methodology. The question ceased to be, 'Should we be teaching languages communicatively?', and became, 'How do we teach languages communicatively?'. As part of this paradigm shift, other concepts (authenticity, learner-centredness, negotiation, etc.) began to cluster around a 'communicative' core. The return of structures and grammar was perhaps inevitable, but equally inevitable was the fact that these re-emerged in 'communicative' guises. Behind these changes lay major shifts in the structures of language education on a global scale, of which the most important aspect was the rapid growth of migration and travel with its consequent influence on markets for language education. This new structural framework for language education undermined

traditional anglocentric assumptions that the main purpose of learning foreign languages was to broaden the mind, and focused attention on learners who were learning languages because they needed to *use* them in an ever-shrinking world.

A similar pattern of development may well lie ahead for the concepts of autonomy and independence in language learning. The need for learners to become more autonomous is increasingly taken for granted as we begin to turn our attention to how the goal of autonomy can best be achieved. At the same time, autonomy and independence are beginning to act as a focus for other methods and approaches, conditioning their orientations and goals. The changing patterns of language education that support this tendency are essentially a continuation of those which supported the mainstreaming of Communicative Language Teaching: the ever-increasing quantity of language education and the growing importance of media and information technologies. We will do well to consider carefully Gill Sturtridge's picture of the future of language education presented in Chapter 5 of this book, a picture in which language learners are more and more *forced* to rely on their own resources in an increasingly technological world. If this picture becomes a reality, it will become all the more important to reflect upon the meanings of autonomy and independence. In such a situation the question may well be whether learners are to become *personally* and *socially* more autonomous as a result of the *situational* autonomy which external circumstances prescribe for them, or whether they will merely become more dependent on the materials and technologies that support this situational autonomy. In a wider perspective, the technologization of education is also a process in which methods and materials flow from the highly developed economies of the West to the less economically developed, but language-hungry, cultures of the rest of the world. In this context, it becomes important that we reflect also on the links between the personal autonomy of learners as individuals, and the broader issue of cultural autonomy in the world in which they live. Autonomy and independence can no longer be thought of simply as alternative methods or approaches to language teaching. They become conditioning concepts for language education, and the questions become, 'What kind of autonomy do we mean?' and 'How do we go about achieving it?'.

In 1988, Arthur Brookes and Peter Grundy published a milestone collection of papers entitled *Individualisation and Autonomy*

in Language Learning, in which they argued that: 'One corollary of learner-centredness is that individualization will assume greater importance, as will the recognition that the autonomy of the learner is our ultimate goal' (p.1). Seven years later, it seems that although the second part of this prediction has been borne out, the close link that was observed between individualization and autonomy is beginning to be broken. This is one aspect of the transition that we are observing. At the same time, as several of the contributions to this collection testify, autonomy and independence are beginning to tie into fields more concerned with the social and political implications of language education: language and culture, critical language pedagogy, language inequalities and rights, world Englishes, and so on. Interestingly, this shift points back to the concern expressed by Brookes and Grundy in their Introduction (based on Riley's opening paper) that individualization and autonomy might be 'ethnocentric' concepts. The attempt to free autonomy and independence from this ethnocentricity is a second aspect of the transition. In a second milestone collection published in 1988, Henri Holec presented a number of reports on autonomous learning projects, in which he observed: 'Among the various kinds of attempt to implement this approach, the most frequent is undoubtedly the establishment of resource centres' (p.10). The third aspect of the transition is a questioning of the efficacy of organizational means towards autonomy (self-access in particular) and an emphasis on the content of learning and relationships between students, teachers and institutions. Self-access resource centres remain an important part of the language education scene, and it is likely they will continue to do so in the future. But proponents of autonomy and independence, it seems, are no longer content simply to promote self-access, they are centrally concerned with how it works and what its influences may be.

Because autonomy and independence are concepts in transition, their future is inevitably uncertain. This book offers a glimpse into that future and shows that there are many involved in this field who are concerned not only to promote autonomy and independence in language learning but also to question and re-evaluate both the concepts and their means of implementation. Our hope, as editors, is that readers will welcome this re-evaluation by joining in the debate.

Philosophy and practice

Introduction

Two of the most pressing issues for those who argue for autonomy and independence in language learning at the present time are, first, to define the senses in which these terms are used, and secondly, to determine how they can be implemented in concrete educational situations. Neither of these questions avails itself of easy answers. Monolithic definitions of autonomy and independence have proved elusive, and it is perhaps more productive to speak of different *versions* of the concepts which correspond to different perspectives and circumstances. Accepted means of implementing autonomy and independence through self-access and self-directed learning have also proved open to question, and again it may be more productive to think of a range of possibilities for implementation.

The first part of this volume, therefore, deals with questions of the philosophy and practice of autonomy and independence for language learning. Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with the theoretical grounding of the concepts, while Chapters 4–6 are concerned with methods of implementation, self-access and self-instruction. The chapters by Benson and Pennycook with their analyses of the historical, political and cultural roots of autonomy contrast with those by Sheerin, Sturtridge and Littlewood, who emphasize autonomy and independence as a means to the end of more effective language learning. For Benson and Pennycook a more overtly political version of autonomy is needed if effectiveness of learning is to be understood in more than narrow technical terms. By presenting this diversity of viewpoints we hope to bring

into focus the importance of the relationship between the theory and practice of autonomous language learning.

In Chapter 2, Phil Benson identifies three 'versions' of autonomy in language learning (technical, psychological and political) and links them to three approaches to knowledge and learning. He relates the technical version of autonomy, with its emphasis on learning strategies and learner training, to positivism and its paradigm that knowledge reflects an objective reality. The psychological version, with its emphasis on the capacities of the individual is linked to constructivism, where knowledge is seen as subjectively based upon unique personal meaning systems. The political version, with its emphasis on control over both the internal and external contexts of learning, is linked to critical theory, which posits that the construction of knowledge is dependent upon prevailing political and social ideologies. Benson's aim in making these connections is to show the historical development of the concept of learner autonomy and to unravel some of the complexities inherent in it, in order to argue for a 'more explicitly political approach'.

In clarifying what such an approach might mean, Benson argues for the inadequacy of the technical/positivist position and the relative failure of the psychological/constructivist position to question the ideological contexts in which learning takes place. He argues for a learning framework in which learners are encouraged to explore relationships between individual beliefs and actions about language and second language learning and the social contexts in which they occur. He concludes by defining eleven areas of activity in which this kind of exploration can be conducted, while providing the caveat that a version of autonomy in language learning based on critical theory is virtually uncharted territory.

For Alastair Pennycook (Chapter 3), critical awareness is crucial to autonomy in language learning as autonomy is fundamentally about 'authoring one's own world'. Like Benson, he is concerned that the concept of autonomy in language learning has become 'psychologized, technologized and universalized', and he argues forcefully for a version of autonomy that stresses the importance of 'voice' and 'cultural alternatives'. Pennycook first examines the notion of autonomy in philosophy and political science and explains how it is open to criticism as a particular cultural and historical product. He shows how autonomy has become an

unquestionable goal in language education, and how the mainstreaming of the concept has emptied it of its radical cultural and political content. In the process, autonomy has been attached to the psychological and to 'progressive' concepts such as 'learner-centredness' and 'learning how to learn'. Pennycook warns that there is a danger in this that autonomy will simply become a question of learners focusing on narrowly defined personal needs. Meanwhile, educators become preoccupied with appropriate strategies, materials and technologies while disregarding the broader cultural context in which language learning takes place.

Pennycook also points to the risk that autonomy will be seen as another example of the free and enlightened West bringing emancipation to the backward and authoritarian classrooms of the world. He argues that there is a need for acute awareness of local cultural, political and economic contexts, and that autonomy should be seen not as 'learning how to learn', but as 'learning how to struggle for cultural alternatives'. The language educator's role is to help learners develop their own 'voice' in order to transform their cultural contexts through their understandings of society. Pennycook ends his chapter with examples from colonial and gender contexts of how educators can help learners become 'voiced', illustrating how autonomy in language learning is dependent, in his view, on an awareness of the cultural contexts of language learning.

Self-access resource centres are the most typical means by which institutions have attempted to implement notions of autonomy and independence over the last 20 years to the extent that 'self-access language learning' is now often used as a synonym for 'autonomous language learning'. Chapters 4–6 directly address the relationship between these two notions. The authors of Chapters 4 and 5, Susan Sheerin and Gill Sturtridge, are well known for their work in the field of self-access while William Littlewood will be better known for his work in general language education. For each author there is a concern to emphasize that self-access and autonomous learning are not the same thing. For both Sheerin and Sturtridge, it is the way that we do self-access that determines whether it promotes autonomy or not. For Littlewood, the place that self-access occupies within a student's overall programme of learning is the crucial factor.

Sheerin makes a distinction between 'learner independence', which refers to a set of dispositions and abilities, and 'self-access'

which refers to materials and organizational systems. Her argument is that self-access can either inhibit or promote independent learning, according to the way it is organized. In other words, there is no automatic relationship between studying in a self-access centre and the development of independence. Her chapter goes on to analyse some of the factors in self-access which can contribute to positive or negative outcomes. Sheerin argues first, that in order to help learners develop independence, it is important that we are able to help them identify their own entry levels and provide appropriate preparation and support. She then makes an important distinction between 'training', which can cover basic skills needed to work in a self-access mode, and 'development', which involves increasing one's self-awareness as a learner. Learner development she argues, is not something that teachers do to learners. It is something that only learners can do for themselves, although there are ways in which teachers can facilitate the process through materials design and organization and through learner support systems.

Sheerin's discussion of materials design points forward to issues discussed in more detail in Part III of this book. Her central argument is worth emphasizing, however. Self-instructional materials, she argues, can actually be antithetical to learner independence if they do no more than transfer the authority of the teacher to the materials selected by the learners. She suggests that it is important that such materials give feedback in ways that encourage learners to accept a degree of uncertainty. A similar theme is explored in her discussion of access and retrieval systems and the role of teachers and counsellors.

Sturtridge (Chapter 5) begins from the assumption that, for reasons connected with the growing quantity of language learning worldwide and the technologization of learning, self-access and the self-access resource centre are here to stay. She argues forcefully that unless such centres are organized in ways that promote autonomy and independence, they will tend to fail. In other words, promotion of autonomy is not only essential to the survival and success of self-access, it is vital to the future of language education, for which self-access modes of learning are likely to become the norm. Sturtridge isolates six factors that lead to successful self-access: (1) good management with support and involvement of learners, (2) suitable location and facilities, (3) staff training and development, (4) learner training and development, (5) using

the cultural strengths of the learners, and (6) appropriate materials. Pointing forward to the concerns of Part II, Sturtridge discusses how these factors depend upon institutional reassessment of the roles of teachers and learners. Like Sheerin, she argues that learning materials can be just as directive as teachers, and that independent learners need to develop the kinds of skills which enable them to be aware of different types of materials, to see the purpose of tasks, to assess the value of tasks, and to make use of teachers and peers as 'resources'. It is in this sense that learner independence is seen to be essential to the success of self-access.

In the concluding chapter to this part, William Littlewood offers a perspective on autonomy and self-access based on his recent involvement with EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses that include a substantial self-access component. His concern is to define what is involved in autonomy for language learning and to elaborate a model to evaluate how self-access work and classroom work can combine to contribute to this goal. Littlewood offers an original interpretation of autonomy in language learning involving the notions of 'autonomy as learner', 'autonomy as communicator' and 'autonomy as a person'. Using an 'integrated' model of language learning, he proposes that different forms of self-access work can be located along a continuum on which 'analytic' and 'experiential' activities ('learning' and 'acquisition') stand at opposite ends. In his view, self-access work is strongest at the analytic/learning end of the continuum, and weakest at the experiential/acquisition end. This is also equivalent to a weakness in regard to the 'productive' skills. Littlewood's experience does not lead him to conclude that self-access work can promote autonomy in isolation from classroom work, but he leaves open the question of whether or not self-access should aim to cover what he sees as the full continuum of language learning. Some of the weaknesses in self-access and self-instructional materials identified by Littlewood are taken up in the chapters that make up Part III, and readers will be able to judge for themselves whether innovative methods and new technologies are able to take on the challenge that Littlewood proposes.