# Democracy, discourse and learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom

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The first part of this article is concerned with learner autonomy in practice. It begins with a working definition of learner autonomy, goes on to describe the discursive practices of three language learning environments in which its development is a central goal, and ends by proposing that autonomy in language learning is underpinned by three general pedagogical principles: learner involvement, learner reflection, and appropriate target language use. The second part of the article considers John Dewey's concept of democracy in education and its relation to learner autonomy, arguing that each concept implies the other and attributing their interdependence to the essentially dialogic nature of communication and learning. The conclusion briefly restates the importance of both concepts for education and society.

## Learner autonomy in practice

### A working definition

Being autonomous means doing things for yourself. Thus learner autonomy requires the learner's full involvement in planning, monitoring and evaluating his or her learning (see, e.g., Holec 1981, Little 1991, Dam 1995). Such involvement in turn requires the development of explicit skills of reflection and analysis. According to this definition learner autonomy entails learning how to learn *intentionally*.

Exponents of learner autonomy argue that it solves two persistent educational problems. The first of these is motivation. If learners are involved in the management of their own learning and are able to shape it according to their developing interests, they are exploiting but also nourishing

their intrinsic motivation, which Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (1985, pp. 32f.) associate with intrinsic needs for competence and self-determination. This is not to say that autonomous learning is always plain sailing. On some days things will seem easier than on others, and sometimes a project that appeared to promise so much at the planning stage will resist successful completion. But as long as learners remain involved in their learning, and thus fundamentally committed to its success, lack of motivation will be temporary and short-lived. The second problem is the gulf that so often exists between the learner and whatever it is he or she is supposed to be learning. This gulf explains educational failure that arises from learner alienation, but it also explains why learners sometimes perform well in exams without being able to apply what they have learnt to the world beyond the classroom. Autonomous learners avoid this problem because their very engagement with the content and process of learning means that what they learn becomes part of what they are.

The scope of our autonomy always depends on what we can already do. The small child's capacity autonomously to explore her environment gradually expands as she learns first to reach and touch, then to crawl, then to stand, then to walk, and so on. Similarly, in educational contexts our capacity for autonomous learning gradually expands as our knowledge and skill expand. Note that "knowledge and skill" here applies to the content of learning but also to the processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation, which to some extent are transferable from one domain to another.

The concept of learner autonomy carries obvious implications for the teacher's role. If learners are to exercise responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluation, what is left for the teacher to do? It is sometimes suggested that she must change her role to one of observer, adviser, or manager of learning resources. No doubt the teacher needs to be all these things, but it is wrong to suppose that she can ever withdraw to the sidelines. She must always play the decisive role in creating and maintaining the learning communities for which she is responsible; she must initiate the various modes of interactive discourse through which her learners can discover, exploit and extend their autonomy; and she must find ways of mediating to them the necessary knowledge and skills, relinquishing control as soon as she sees that they can start to do things for themselves and looking for the most appropriate way of leading them to the next level. This is a never-ending spiral process that demands unremitting vigilance and discourse skills from the teacher.

The three examples that follow illustrate this essentially psychological view of learner autonomy and the teacher's role in its development. Because they focus respectively on primary, secondary and adult learners

they also show some of the ways in which the pursuit of learner autonomy varies according the age of the learners.

## Example 1:
## newcomer pupils learning English in Irish primary schools

Since the early 1990s unprecedented numbers of migrants have come to Ireland. Whatever the status of their parents, all children and adolescents are required to attend school. At primary level newcomer pupils may enter school at any age between 4½ and 12; they may arrive at any point in the school year; they may have some English, a little English, or no English at all; their domestic circumstances are infinitely variable; and they may or may not have previous educational experience. Newcomer pupils are assigned to a mainstream class, usually on the basis of their age, and are provided with a maximum of two years' English language support on a withdrawal basis, typically one lesson each day.

In 2000 Integrate Ireland Language and Training, a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College Dublin, was given the task of defining an English language support curriculum for primary schools, developing teaching materials, and mediating the curriculum and materials to teachers in an ongoing programme of twice-yearly in-service seminars. The curriculum comprises a set of English Language Proficiency Benchmarks based on the first three levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001). The benchmarks are elaborated "globally" and in relation to thirteen recurrent themes (Units of Work) derived from the official primary curriculum: Myself; Our school; Food and clothes; Colours, shapes and opposites; People who help us; Weather; Transport and travel; Seasons, holidays and festivals; The local and wider community; Time; People and places in other areas; Animals and plants; Caring for my locality.[1]

The main teaching/learning support is a version of the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio. The ELP has three obligatory components – a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier – and is designed to serve complementary pedagogical and reporting functions, at once supporting the development of learner autonomy and displaying the owner's achieved L2 proficiency (for a general introduction to the ELP, see Little 2002). In this particular version the language passport focuses on the owner's identity, with particular reference to language: who he/she is, and what language(s) other than English he/she speaks, and with whom. Progress is tracked against the skills and levels of the global benchmarks. The language biography focuses on the owner's daily exposure to language

and provides "can do" checklists for the thirteen Units of Work. These are used to plan learning and monitor progress. The dossier contains a number of worksheets related to the Units of Work and is used as a place to collect work in progress and save special achievements.[2]

The goal of English language support is to enable pupils to participate fully and without disadvantage in the educational process; in other words, to help them to become fully autonomous *users* of English. It must also help them to develop as much conscious awareness of language and language learning as possible – in other words, to become autonomous *learners* of English – so that their proficiency continues to develop when they are in their mainstream class and when they are no longer entitled to language support.

Evelyn Doherty, who teaches in a primary school in one of Dublin's western suburbs, takes all newcomer pupils in her school for one lesson each day, grouping them according to age. She uses the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks to plan her teaching and the ELP to support her pupils' learning. In the course of each school year she covers all the Units of Work, and all her pupils follow the same cycle of themes. In this way she establishes a firm and explicit framework for their learning.

How exactly does learner autonomy come into play? The first thing to note is that pupils' individuality is fully acknowledged. For example, a map of the world shows where each of them came from, and their names are written on cards and pinned to the "welcome" section of the classroom wall (figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1

Figure 2

This gives them a sense of belonging, and with time it also gives them a sense that they are co-owners of the learning environment. But Evelyn also acknowledges her pupils' individuality in a more profound sense. In everything she does with them she starts from where they are, shaping the English she mediates to them according to their present knowledge as well as their future needs. For example, an early activity associated with the topic "Parts of the body" focuses on "My two feet": pupils tell her what they can do with their feet. The resulting poster (figure 3) indicates who contributed each word, so that individual knowledge explicitly becomes part of a learning resource for the whole group. In this way pupils are brought to an early understanding that they can contribute to the learning of their peers. They are also made explicitly aware of what



Figure 3

they already know as well as what they need to know. Such awareness, of course, is a prerequisite for any kind of involvement in planning, monitoring and evaluating learning.

This process of bringing pupils' existing knowledge to explicit awareness also underlies the many activities in which words and text are combined with drawing and painting. Each activity gives linguistic expression to some aspect of the individual pupil's identity or knowledge, which then becomes a building block for other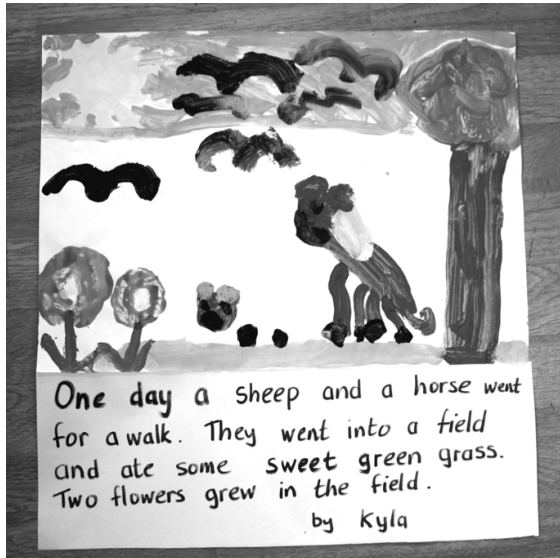 pupils to use in the construction of their own English language proficiency. One frequent activity is telling a story by painting a picture and then writing a short text. When pupils cannot write their own text, either because they are too young or because they do not yet have enough English, they paint their picture and Evelyn negotiates a text with them. Sometimes the result is a simple description of the picture (figure 4), but sometimes a text emerges that tells about an event or problem in the child's life outside



Figure 4

school (figure 5). Learning how to talk about such things is important if one is to be a fully autonomous user of English, able to establish firm continuities between the classroom and life outside school.



Figure 5

Everything that happens in Evelyn Doherty's classroom is embedded in the spontaneous – and thus autonomous – use of English, and (as the examples I have given imply) most activities culminate in some kind of written product, which is put on the classroom wall, kept in the pupil's ELP, or stuck into a large scrapbook devoted to a particular theme or project. As the school year progresses, the walls of the classroom become an ever richer learning resource that the pupils create for one another (figures 6 and 7) – a learning resource that makes language visible and encourages reflection on linguistic form and learning process. Such reflection is made explicit every two weeks or so, when Evelyn helps her pupils to review their work against the relevant checklists in their ELP. Regular consideration of what they can do in English helps to develop their metalinguistic awareness; it also introduces even very young children to the practice of self-assessment.



Figure 6                                   Figure 7

## Example 2:
### learning to learn English in a Danish middle school

Hanne Thomsen (2000, 2003) describes a classroom in which teenagers gradually discover how to manage their learning of English as a foreign

language. From the first she involves them in a quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analysed and evaluated with the whole class. All pupils are obliged to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce. Although they identify individual goals, they mostly pursue them via collaborative work in small groups. They themselves select the theme and determine the outcome of the projects that drive their learning. Also from the first, English is insisted on as the medium of classroom communication, which means that the target language is used to plan, monitor and evaluate learning as well as to perform the communicative tasks that are the process and goal of learning.

Three things in particular distinguish Hanne Thomsen's classroom from Evelyn Doherty's. First, whereas Evelyn is working in an immersion situation where the learners have a variety of mother tongues, so that the target language is the only possible medium of classroom communication, Hanne's pupils all share the same mother tongue and are learning English at a distance from English-speaking communities. This means that using the target language as the chief medium of teaching and learning requires special determination and effort. Secondly, whereas Evelyn's pupils need to acquire proficiency in English for immediate educational purposes, for Hanne's pupils English is another school subject. Thus their use of the target language must be motivated by a sense of immediate need arising from an awareness that communicative language use plays an essential role in successful language learning. Thirdly, Hanne's pupils are somewhat older than Evelyn's and further advanced educationally, which means that for them learning how to learn can involve more explicit and elaborate analysis, which in turn means that Hanne can place greater emphasis on the metalinguistic function of language.

I shall illustrate this feature of her classroom with reference to a vocabulary learning project undertaken by 13-year-old pupils in their fourth year of learning English (described in greater detail in Thomsen 2003, pp. 39–45). The vocabulary learning project was embedded in reading projects devised by the learners themselves. A Harry Potter project, for example, involved reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, making a vocabulary notebook, selecting Harry Potter texts from the internet, writing a report for the library, and presenting the Harry Potter phenomenon to the rest of the class. The project had two special focuses: new vocabulary and how to make good presentations using visual aids. Lessons (double periods of one and a half hours) were divided into three parts. The first ten minutes were devoted to new vocabulary. Hanne Thomsen wrote on the board one word from each pupil's list of new words,

gradually adding definitions, translations and successful learning strategies. Pupils also used word cards to test one another on recently learnt words. Next, an hour was spent on cooperative reading and other work required by the reading project plans. Finally the last fifteen minutes of the lesson were devoted to selecting new items for inclusion in vocabulary notebooks. Words and phrases were entered according to the following set plan (Thomsen 2003, p. 41):

| | |
|---|---|
| Word/phrase: | to be fed up with |
| Sentence: | I am really fed up with you telling me lies all the time |
| Guess: | opvosket med? |
| Translation: | at være trœt af |
| Definition: | I don't like it |
| I am fed up with: | dislike, hate, can't stand it, won't have it, it makes me mad, it makes me sick |
| Use: | We are so fed up with punk |

Gradually the different reading projects yielded a multitude of vocabulary learning strategies favoured by individuals and the class. The final list is shown in figure 8 (Thomsen 2003, p. 42). For a concluding class discussion,

HOW TO LEARN NEW WORDS
 Read and listen to a lot of language
– and LEARN new words

DISCOVERY STRATEGIES
Guess meaning from context
and your knowledge of the language
Ask others for meaning – (in)directly
Look up words in wordlists or dictionaries

CONSOLIDATION STRATEGIES

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Make drawings of the word | Make mind maps or webs | Make poems |
| Make word cards | Make crosswords | Make word pairs |
| Make word posters | Make associations, synonyms, | Play games: domino, memory, |
| Make word lists | and antonyms | hang-man, odd-man-out, |
| Make word chains | Build sentences | scrabble, bingo, etc. |
| Make word pyramids | Rhyme | Fill the blackboard |
| Make alphabet exercises | Make thematic lists | Add adjectives |
| Make and fill in cloze tests | Make grammatical lists (word | Make model sentences |
| Note down pronunciation | classes) | Make vocabulary notebooks |
| Read aloud and imagine | Sing or rap | Make definitions |
| Practise spelling – morphemes, | Make small talks | Use post-its |
| pre- and suffixes | Make stories | . . . . . . . |

Figure 8

Hanne Thomsen collected entries from individual written evaluations and circulated them. Here are some examples (pp. 43–44; English uncorrected):

> The vocabulary part was tedeous and boring, but I can remember the words I have seen in my book. I used imagening, and looking up in diction-aries and writing sentences. That are good activities for me.

> I do believe that I have learned a bunch of new words. Some times it was tough because the words simply didn't want to stick to my brains.

> I think it has been a very good exercise for me. It has been a very useful thing, even thoug it sometimes has been tougth and very boring. Hence-forward I reckon I'll take a little glossary notebook and write down new words once I come across good ones. It's worthwhile spending time on looking at them, thinking about them and writing them down. I know it's important for me to learn new words.

> I reckon that it has helped me a lot, because the work we have done in common has been very thorough. I also think that it was hard, but anyway a good way to learn English words.

These examples show just how autonomous young teenagers can be in managing and reflecting on their own learning. They also illustrate the impressive proficiency levels that can be achieved in a relatively short time when the target language itself is used to manage, reflect on and evaluate learning.

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Example 3:
### learning English in Ireland as an adult with refugee status

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My third example, like my first, comes from the domain of migrant language learning. Besides supporting the teaching and learning of English as a second language in primary (and secondary) schools, Integrate Ireland Language and Training provides full-time English language courses for adults with refugee status. The courses consist of twenty class hours each week plus ten hours of self-access study and homework. Learners come from many different linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Their purpose in attending English classes is to develop the proficiency they need in order to cope with life in Ireland – the world of work, but also officialdom in its various guises, doctors and dentists, children's school principals and teachers, and so on. Most learners attend courses for one year, and most have at least a small amount of English when they first enrol.

   The pedagogical approach adopted by Integrate Ireland Language and Training combines features of the two approaches I have already

described. Like Evelyn Doherty's pupils, these adult learners are in an immersion situation where the target language is the only possible medium of teaching and learning. They too are learning English not as part of their general education but for immediate "life" purposes; and they too capture and track their language learning using a version of the European Language Portfolio.[3] On the other hand, precisely because they are adult, their learning includes analytical procedures that are closely akin to Hanne Thomsen's approach to vocabulary learning.

The range of communicative proficiency that these adult learners need to master is easy to predict. Nevertheless, each class negotiates its own curriculum, and each week of learning begins with detailed planning and ends with self-assessment, peer assessment and general evaluation. From the beginning learners are compelled to manage their own learning, and this brings them two benefits. On the one hand, it ensures that they are fully engaged in the learning process; on the other, it helps them to develop skills of self-management that can be transferred to other parts of their lives.

The development of autonomy is particularly urgent for adults who need to extend their identity to a new language in order to take their place in a new society and come to terms with an alien culture. Those who have no proficiency in English and no literacy skills in their mother tongue face a particularly difficult challenge; for their language learning depends on their developing mastery of the basics of literacy and numeracy, and vice versa. Integrate Ireland's teachers use the same fundamental technique as Evelyn Doherty. Every activity starts from wherever the learners happen to be; and as far as possible the textual basis for simple literacy-building exercises is provided by the learners themselves. Thus one student's account of her daily schedule provides the basis for a negative-forming exercise for the whole class (figure 9),
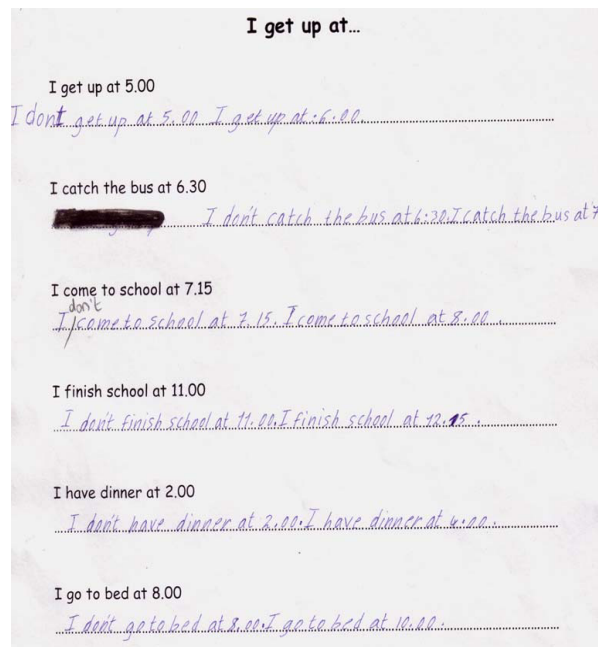


Figure 9

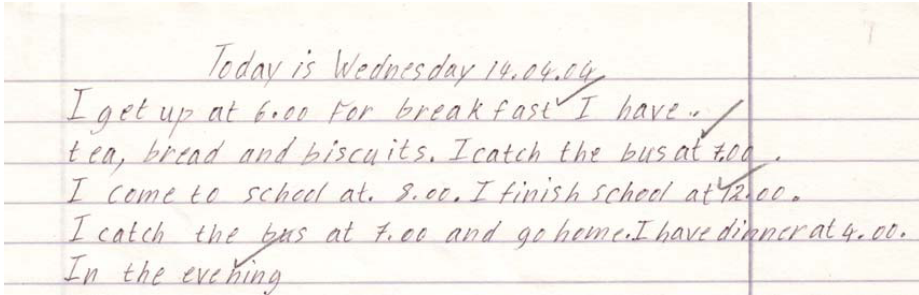after which students use their responses to compose texts describing their own schedule (figure 10).

Figure 10

The example of Fardosa, an 18-year-old Somali woman whose previous educational experience was limited to a few months of primary schooling, is particularly vivid. The first thing she had to do when she began her course was learn how to form letters and numbers, write her name and simple phrases, and compile lists of words. Each of these activities had to be mediated by a combination of language and mime, which meant that Fardosa quickly mastered basic patterns of oral interaction in English. Figures 11–13 illustrate her progress over the first two months of her course. From the beginning, of course, Fardosa was also learning how to use English to give expression to her own identity (figure 14). After one year of unremitting effort, during which many tears of frustration were shed but her underlying motivation never wavered, she was able to compose the text reproduced in figure 15. When she had completed
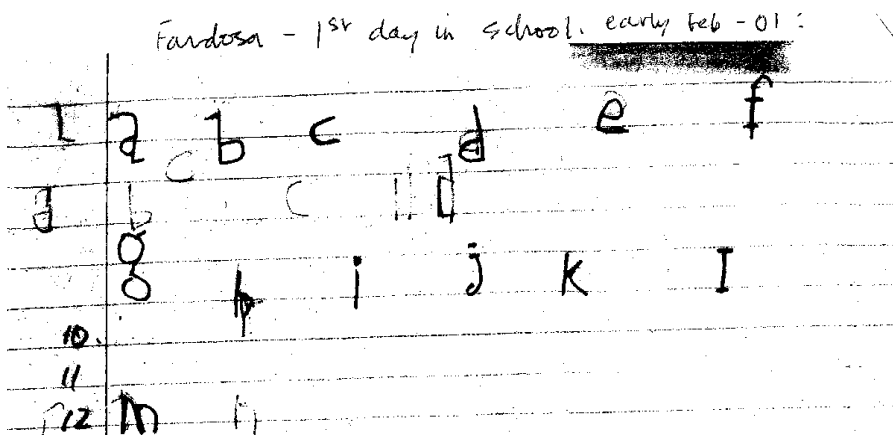
Figure 11

1. bath    jardo 11 Pot
sa
2 tilet          12 basin
3 Shower     13 door
4 Kitchen    14 bed room
5 Woman     15 window
6 cooker
7 scissors
8 sitting room
9 garage

10 Telephone

Figure 12

aÆIC

Fergus    Is in the

Olive    is in the
bedroom
Kieran    is in the
garage
Helen    is in the
Helen    bathroom
m

Figure 13

Tues 6th Feb 01 -

i am fardosa

i am somali

i am womon

i am 18

Figure 14

I have come from Somalia. is in Africa
and it has three neighbour Countries.
They are Ethipia, Djbaty and Kenya.
Somalia has the longest sea Coast in Africa.
The capital City of Somalia is Mogadishu.
Mogadishu is a medium coastal city. it is
Population was one millions before the Somarian
a war civil. In Mogadishu there are different
types of houses. Some are, And some are Ib an.
people in Mogadishu and generally in Somalia.
Speak only one language. The language
is Called Somalia. they wear the moslim
tradisional Clothes. The women wear Clothes that
cover all their body except their Facts and
Their hands.

Figure 15

two years of full-time language learning with Integrate Ireland, Fardosa
moved into full-time clerical work. After some months of work experi-
ence, she decided to improve her skills and qualifications further and was
admitted to a full-time vocational training programme.

## Three pedagogical principles

In each of these environments learners routinely become highly proficient in both the spontaneous use of their target language (autonomous language users) and the reflective management of their own learning (autonomous language learners). This is attributable, I believe, to three factors. First, from the very beginning learners are involved in their own learning and empowered to determine its shape and direction. Each new move in the learning process begins from wherever the learners themselves happen to be – in their target language proficiency, their achieved learning skill, and their orientation to the particular learning task and theme. Secondly, learners are constantly being challenged to think about what they have done, what they are doing, and what they will do next. The activities they engage in ensure that the learning process is always visible to them in the form of posters, drawings, captions, stories, and so on; and they regularly assess their own performance and progress. Thirdly, from the earliest stages learners are challenged to use the target language as a medium of communication but also of reflection. These three factors yield three pedagogical principles – of *learner involvement*, *learner reflection*, and *target language use* – whose relation to one another is captured in figure 16. Each principle provides a different
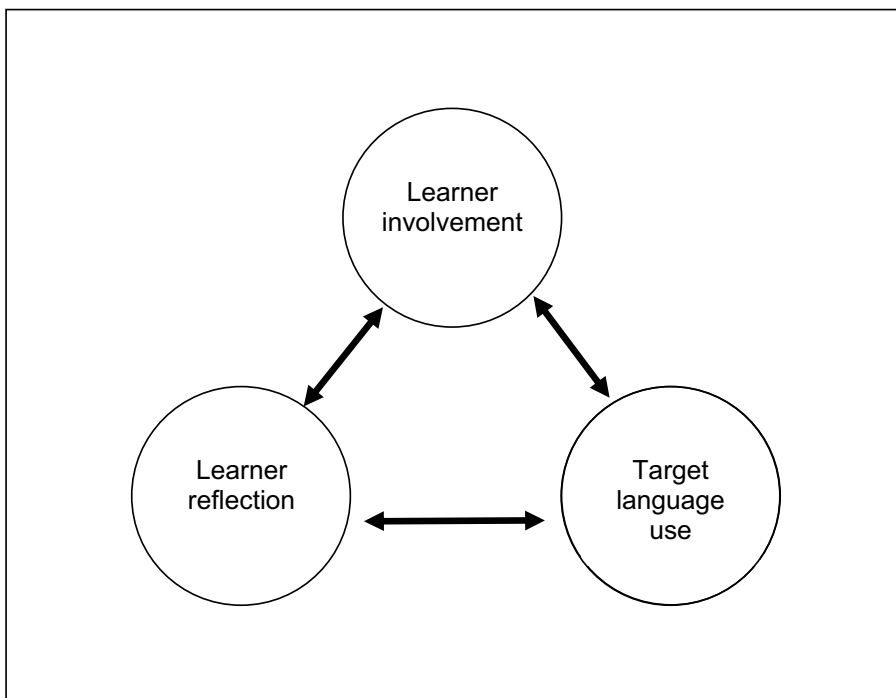


Figure 16

perspective on the complex process of autonomous language learning; because each implies the other two, none of them has priority over the others (for further discussion, see Little 1999, 2001). In interaction with one another the three principles can be used to determine the discourse roles and discursive practices most apt to secure the development of learner autonomy in any particular language learning context.

# Democracy in education
# and its relation to learner autonomy

The pedagogies that I have just described have their origin in a particular understanding of human motivation and psychology. But the modes of discourse generated by systematic pursuit of the principles of learner involvement, learner reflection, and target language use have inescapable political implications. They are possible in the first place only if the teacher is prepared to transform traditional power structures in the classroom; and the empowerment of learners to shape and direct their learning inevitably raises larger questions of institutional organization and ownership. It is impossible to separate motivation and psychology from politics. This is one of the fundamental implications of John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916, reprinted 1997).

  Dewey summarizes his philosophical position as follows:

> Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a *particular* social ideal. The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups. An undesirable society, in other words, is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience. A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic (Dewey 1997, p. 99).

Dewey's starting point in *Democracy and Education* is the idea that teaching and learning, transmission and communication are essential for the survival of any society (p. 5). By education, however, he means not only the formal and intentional procedures of schooling but the informal and incidental modes of learning that abound outside formal contexts. Indeed, he anticipates more recent concerns when he draws attention to the "danger

of creating an undesirable split" between formal and informal education (p. 9): learning in school should be continuous with learning out of school (p. 358). What is more, school should lay the foundations for lifelong learning: "The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact" (p. 53).

Dewey insists that "education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told" (Dewey 1997, p. 38): "The development within the young of the attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society cannot take place by direct conveyance of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge" (p. 22). Education depends on the "intermediary of the environment" (p. 22); it is a matter of participating and sharing – Dewey defines "normal communication" as "that in which there is a joint interest, a common interest, so that one is eager to give and the other to take" (p. 217). In other words, the proper medium of education is reciprocal communication comprising modes of discourse that are open, exploratory, interpretative and contingent (van Lier 2001). For Dewey such communication is inseparable from reflective thinking – "mind and intelligent or purposeful engagement in a course of action into which things enter are identical" (Dewey 1997, p. 137); and thinking is "the accurate and deliberate instituting of connections between what is done and its consequences" (p. 151). Thus the essentials of educational method are the same as the essentials of reflective thinking, and they include the requirement that "the pupil have a genuine situation of experience – that there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for its own sake" (p. 163).

This necessarily compressed and somewhat simplified account of Dewey's educational philosophy amounts to an argument that starts from large social and political considerations and ends with an (admittedly rather general) account of educational method that is in every respect harmonious with my working definition of learner autonomy and the examples I used to illustrate it. This is hardly surprising. After all, the very term "learner autonomy" carries an implied political challenge, while the conjunction of "democracy and education" implies participation, exchange and empowerment. I want to go beyond this obvious circularity, however, and argue that Dewey's concept of democracy and learner autonomy both have their origin in the nature of the human organism.

In the working definition with which I began this article, I suggested that one of the sources of learner autonomy is the learner's intrinsic motivation, which Deci and Ryan (1985) associate with intrinsic needs for competence and self-determination. In other words, learner autonomy exploits fundamental human characteristics:

> The intrinsic needs for competence and self-determination motivate an on-
> going process of seeking and attempting to conquer optimal challenges.
> When people are free from the intrusion of drives and emotions, they seek
> situations that interest them and require the use of their creativity and re-
> sourcefulness. They seek challenges that are suited to their competencies
> that are neither too easy nor too difficult. When they find optimal challenges,
> people work to conquer them, and they do so persistently. In short, the needs
> for competence and self-determination keep people involved in ongoing cycles
> of seeking and conquering optimal challenges (Deci & Ryan 1985, pp. 32f.).

We see early evidence of this in the persistence with which small children
struggle to overcome physical limitations in order to explore their envi-
ronment; we see it too in the sustained engagement and effort of the
learners in my three examples. According to this social-psychological
tradition, however, we need to feel not only that we are autonomous
(self-determining, volitional in our behaviour) and competent (able to
overcome optimal challenges), but also that we are "connected", that we
relate to other people in a mutually beneficial way (Deci 1995, p. 88). As
a result, the freedoms conferred by our autonomy and confirmed by our
competence are always constrained by our dependence on others (as I
have pointed out elsewhere, total social independence is not autonomy
but autism; Little 1991, p. 5). But here too we are brought up against an
irreducible feature of human nature. Communication in education involves
reciprocity, as Dewey insisted; and it is clear from my practical examples
that the growth of individual autonomy in language learning and lan-
guage use arises from engagement in various modes of reciprocal dis-
course. The development of individual cognitive, metacognitive and meta-
linguistic processes is mediated by the various interactions that the teacher
is responsible for initiating and sustaining.

It is by now a commonplace to insist on the inseparability of individual-
cognitive and social-interactive processes in education as in all other forms
of cultural activity, and there is no longer novelty in appealing to the
authority of Lev S. Vygotsky (1978, 1986). But it is still worth drawing
attention to the fact that our need for autonomy and connectedness is
hard-wired into our constitution. Since the 1970s, research on early child
development has shown that we have an inborn capacity for "intersub-
jectivity" that makes us interactive by nature. In particular, the work of
Colwyn Trevarthen and his associates (summarized in Trevarthen 1998),
has shown that children are born with "motives to find and use the mo-
tives of other persons in 'conversational' negotiation of purposes, emo-
tions, experiences and meaning" (Trevarthen 1998, p. 16). In other words,

we enter the world primed to take the initiative in establishing reciprocal relationships with those around us. One remark of Trevarthen's suggests an inevitable and necessary link between motivation, autonomy, development, reflectivity and communication:

> This inborn intersubjective faculty of the infant must be seen as a direct effect of pure, unthinking motivation. Nevertheless, it has a rudimentary reflectivity and an autonomy that presage thoughtful message-making in the head, and communication of interest in a shared world (Trevarthen 1992, p. 105).

The concept of intersubjectivity provides a basis for exploring the mechanics of first language acquisition (e.g., Akhtar & Tomasello 1998) and the development of our capacity for reflective thinking (e.g., Hobson 1998). It implies that to be culturally embedded is to be dialogically constituted (Rommetveit 1998, p. 371), and that language itself is essentially dialogic in nature (p. 371). It explains why autonomy and the interdependence of connectedness are fundamental human needs; and it helps to explain why even non-participatory political systems need to claim that they are democratic – that they make "provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms" (Dewey 1997, p. 99).

# Conclusion

Dewey is sometimes criticized for basing his arguments on an unrealistic view of what is socially possible. After all, common social purposes and citizens eager to participate in the democratic process are nowadays increasingly difficult to identify. But democracy in education is a matter of exploring and responding to the democratic ideal rather than attempting to reflect current political realities. It has to do with respect for the individual's rights and freedoms and implies reciprocity and interdependence in all social relations, large and small.

The ideal of learner autonomy is likewise liable to be dismissed as simply too utopian, despite the fact that it seeks to ground itself in a research-based understanding of human cognition, learning and communication – and despite the evidence of practical examples such as those I adduced in the first part of this article. But to pursue the goal of learner autonomy is neither to insist that all learners are the same nor to ignore the many obstacles that stand in the way of its realization. Rather, it is to acknowledge learners' individuality but also their common cognitive and

social constitution, and to seek ways of enabling them to maximize their capacity for consciously self-managed volitional behaviour.

The pursuit of learner autonomy and the pursuit of democracy in education are one and the same, as I have argued in the second part of this article. Both are imperatives that arise from the way in which the human organism is constituted. By developing learner autonomy we are equipping learners to engage critically yet responsibly in the social processes they encounter inside but also outside the classroom, and thus contributing to the survival and further development of democracy as a political process. By developing learner autonomy in *language* classrooms we are also laying the foundations for educational, cultural and social exchange, without which mutually beneficial international relations are likely to become increasingly difficult.

Notes

1. For more details, see Little and Lazenby Simpson 2004; the benchmarks can be downloaded from <www.iilt.ie>.
2. This version of the ELP can be downloaded from <www.iilt.ie>.
3. The so-called Milestone ELP, which can be downloaded from <www.eu-milestone.de>.

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