

Learner independence: reflecting on experience

Keynote Address

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Introduction

What do a graduate course in language teaching methodology, an undergraduate writing course for international students and a series of foreign language learning advisory sessions have in common? In each setting, the promotion of learner independence is an explicit goal. In this paper I reflect on my experience in these three contexts and identify common issues and constraints in achieving the goal. The paper goes on to explore unifying elements in these three seemingly diverse settings and indicates directions for future practice and research in learner independence.

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the conference organisers for giving me this opportunity to reflect on my current practice as a teacher, and to question how what I may or may not do fosters learner independence. Opportunities to stop and reflect on one's practice as a teacher often reveal interesting new insights. This is precisely what happened as I was preparing this presentation. It helped me to recognise the extent to which one of the contexts in which I work privileges the opportunities available to the learners to assume control of some of the decisions surrounding their learning. As a result, I have begun to focus on the other two contexts, seeking ways of enhancing the learning opportunities in those situations.

I plan to talk about learner independence from my perspective as a language teacher, a language learning advisor and a language teacher educator. Within each of these contexts, the question I intend to explore in this presentation is – *In what way can I enhance my learners' confidence and willingness to operate independently in their learning?* I have deliberately mentioned confidence ahead of willingness, because I am convinced that affective preparation for assuming control of one's learning is an essential first step.

First I will briefly outline the three contexts in which I currently work. Then I will discuss two important issues which influence attempts to foster learning independence in each setting. Out of this discussion arises my belief that certain elements in the context can predispose learners to assume control of their learning. Finally, on the basis of this analysis of the opportunities and constraints in each context, I will make a number of recommendations for future practice and research.

The three contexts

I currently work with learners in three different settings (see Figure 1):

- 1 Academic writing course for international students
- 2 Advising for language learners
- 3 Language teaching methodology course for practising teachers

In each setting, an explicit goal of my involvement is to encourage learner willingness and ability to manage their learning for themselves. The first step in achieving this goal, I believe, is to develop their confidence in their own ability to learn independently. In this section, I describe the learners in each of the three contexts, identify their learning goals and explain how I see my role in each setting in relationship to learner goals.

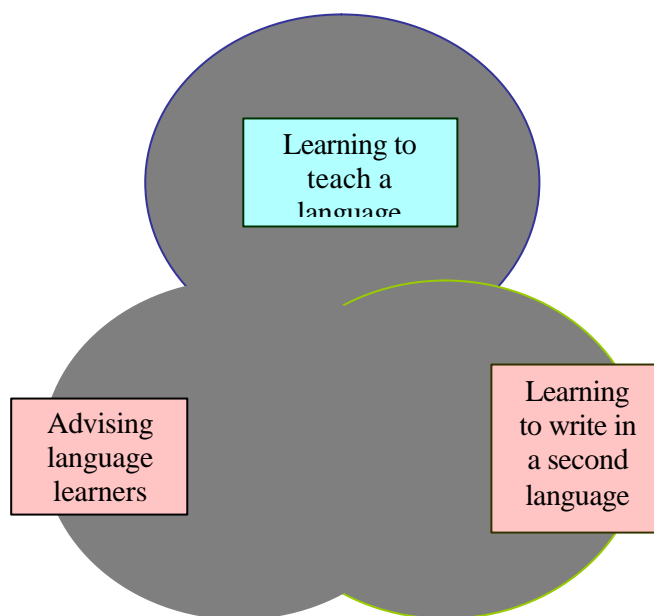


Figure 1: Three learning contexts

Academic writing course

The learners who enrol in the academic writing course are international students from many different (principally Asian) countries, usually in their first year of study at our university. The vast majority of this year's intake were from China, but we also had students from Cambodia, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sweden and Taiwan. Most students have sat IELTS within 6-12 months of enrolling and few have achieved more than a score of 6 for writing.

Students enrol for the academic writing course for a variety of reasons. Some students are required to enrol for the writing course as part of the Twinning arrangement between their universities and ours. However, most choose to enrol because they believe their academic English skills are weak and they lack confidence in their ability to write assignments and reports at university. Many students state that they expect the writing course to help them pass their other subjects. Therefore their objectives are a combination of language-focused goals and more general academic aspirations. One of the unexpected benefits of participation in the course for many international students is the opportunity to participate actively in workshops, without the fear of being laughed at by local students who are usually much quicker to contribute and are often impatient with their international classmates. This contributes significantly to enhancing learner confidence in participating in class, and eventually in engaging in the writing process.

How then do I see my role as tutor in relation to the learners' stated goals? While the lecture component of the course carries some of the responsibility for providing instruction and practice, I see my tutoring role as incorporating the following four aspects:

- developing learner understanding of academic writing genres and expectations
- providing instruction, modelling, practice and feedback on composing and editing strategies
- providing opportunities for learners to practise composing and editing strategies and receive feedback on them
- integrating opportunities for reflection with instruction in strategies and process

This is in line with an approach which views the teacher's role as essentially one of managing learning opportunities (see Crabbe 2003 and Cotterall and Crabbe 2002). Of these four aspects, I see the provision of opportunities for reflection as being the most closely linked to the fostering of learner

independence. Instruction alone is unlikely to foster independence. However, when opportunities to try out new skills are integrated with opportunities to receive feedback and, crucially, to reflect on how that experience modifies learner understanding of the task, there is real potential to foster independence of thought and action.

Language advising

The second context in which I work alongside learners is within the Language Advisory Service offered to all students enrolled in language courses at Victoria University. Students who want to discuss their language learning progress or seek advice, make a twenty-minute appointment with an advisor, through the Language Learning Centre. The majority of those who use the Service are native speakers of English who are learning foreign languages. However some non-native speakers of English also use the Service to seek advice on learning of other languages or on study strategies to deal with the content of their degree courses.

Most of the students who use the Language Advisory Service wish to solve an immediate problem they face in their language learning. Often students book an appointment when a language test is imminent, seeking advice on memorisation strategies or on ways of understanding grammatical rules. As a consequence, few of the students who make an appointment to see a language advisor return for a follow-up session. We therefore find it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the sessions.

I see the principal responsibilities of the advisor in this setting as helping the learners to refine the statement of their problem, analyse its possible causes and identify suitable strategies to solve it. When learners are frustrated with their language learning, or disappointed with their performance on a test, it can be difficult to accurately pinpoint the nature of their difficulty. Therefore another important aim for the advisor in these sessions is to boost learner confidence. This is often done by raising awareness of the language learning process and pointing out those aspects which are working well for the learner. One critical difference between this setting and the academic writing course is the detachment of the advisory session from opportunities for the learner to exercise the language skills under discussion.

Language teaching methodology course

The third context in which I have been teaching this year is on a language teaching methodology course for practising teachers. The learners in this course are native and non-native speakers of English who teach English at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, either in New Zealand or overseas, but particularly in the South Pacific, China and Japan. Some of the learners have been teaching English for many years. Many teach within official government-sponsored curricula and others work in the private sector where they enjoy greater curricular freedom.

The goals of the teachers enrolled on the methodology course are reasonably uniform. Since this is a university-based course which does not include a practicum, and since all are experienced teachers, their focus is on acquiring knowledge, rather than skills. Therefore, their principal goal is to enhance their understanding of principles of language teaching methodology, and as a result, to enhance their confidence. For some, the goal may also be articulated in more specific, pragmatic terms in that they wish to expand their *bag of tricks* for the language classroom. In such a context, how can the teachers' independence as learners be fostered?

In this setting, I see my role as raising awareness of the language learning process and developing problem solving skills. In order to function independently in the language classroom, teachers need to be able to analyse and address learners' language learning problems. In order to achieve this, they need to have a sound understanding of principles of language teaching pedagogy on the one hand, and the language acquisition process on the other. In my view, all language learning difficulties can be understood by referring back to a simple model of how language acquisition occurs (see Cotterall 2000). Therefore a key role of the tutor in this setting is to provide opportunities to explore those principles and apply their understanding in discussion tasks and analysis of case studies.

Issues which influence attempts to foster independence

Relationship between learning goals and opportunities to apply new skills

Despite the obvious differences between these three different teaching/learning contexts, each is influenced by two important issues. The first of these centres on the relationship between the learners'

learning goals and the existence of opportunities to apply their new learning. The second issue relates to the salience of opportunities to reflect on learning in each of the three contexts.

Let me illustrate the first issue by discussing what happens in the academic writing course. In that context, the learners' academic and learning goals are closely aligned with the course goals. For example, many learners enrolling in the academic writing course want to learn how to use citations appropriately. A substantial amount of time is spent in lectures and workshops raising learner awareness of the conventions for incorporating citations into academic writing, as well as providing opportunities for learners to practise integrating citations into their own writing. When learners make some progress in achieving this goal, they are immediately able to apply their new skills independently in producing assignments and reports for their other university courses. Little (1991: 6) identifies the application of learning to other aspects of life as a distinguishing feature of learner autonomy: *Clearly, the autonomy that Holec wants to promote is not confined to learning in a more or less formal educational context, but carries over into every other area of life.*

The learners enrolled in my academic writing course are highly motivated to acquire the target skills because the stakes are high. The success of their university studies is on the line. The fact that the learners urgently need to acquire the skills in which the course provides instruction both enhances their motivation and facilitates the development of their independence.

However the situation is very different for learners who attend language advisory sessions. Most of the learners we meet in the advisory sessions are learning foreign languages and therefore have few authentic opportunities to apply their learning. Clearly, there is no opportunity within the language advising session for learners to apply the knowledge they have gained. In many cases the language advisor is not a speaker of the target language, nor is the advising session, an interview between two native speakers of English, a natural context for target language use to occur. This implies a disjunction between the advising context and the trying out of knowledge or understandings gained. If learner independence is best developed as a result of trying out, opportunities for developing such independence are at one remove from the advisory session. Therefore in the advisory sessions, independence can only be promoted in general theoretical terms.

Opportunities to reflect

The second issue which influences tutor attempts to foster independence is the existence of opportunities to reflect on learning. Reflection is an essential element in increasing learners' ability to operate independently. However, the opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning are not equally salient in all three contexts. This can be illustrated by contrasting the writing course with the language teaching methodology course.

Reflection is a central component of the academic writing course. Opportunities to reflect are provided in discussion tasks, journal writing, comments on cover sheets attached to writing tasks, peer review sessions and conferences with the tutor. The ways in which these opportunities contribute to the development of learning independence are captured in learners' weekly journal writing and summarised in their end-of-course written reflections. For example, one learner sent the following comment in an e-mail message shortly after the end of the course:

You know, just 20 minutes ago one of my flatmate came to me and told me his teacher told him his essay has too much problems, I read his essay, gave him some feedback and told him he need to ask his teacher for the problems of his essay, and he also need to have a plan first before writing ... I made a plan for him according to what he said about the ideas ... This make me think of myself, just few months ago you help me to make my first plan for the essay ... at that time, I had no idea about writing essay, I didn't even know how to write a plan ... but now, I can teach my flatmate about some of the writing skills ... Taking WRIT 151 is really a good choice, and we are so lucky to have you such a terrific tutor.

In the language teaching methodology course, there is a strong tendency for practice to override reflection. This occurs most probably because teachers are driven by immediate pragmatic concerns and needs. As a result, they tend to focus on particular tasks, rather than focusing on the principles

underpinning task design or methodology. However when, earlier this year, we designed an assignment in which reflection on previous learning was central, the teachers responded well and produced thoughtful work of a high standard. The implication for us as teachers is that reflection can be built into any course. But where reflection is not salient, learners will focus on more pragmatic, immediate concerns.

Recommendations for practice and research

Reflecting on the influences that operate in these different contexts has highlighted a number of important lessons for my own future practice, and suggested some valuable directions for future research into learner independence.

Align course goals with 'real world' goals

Analysis of these three teaching/learning contexts has highlighted the importance of aligning course goals with real world goals. The more closely aligned these are, the easier it will be to promote the development of learner independence, and to provide opportunities for learners to apply their new skills and knowledge in real world settings. Learners are more highly motivated by learning tasks which resemble those they face in the real world. The most successful assessment task in our most recent teacher education course was one which required the teachers to produce case studies of current learners facing particular learning problems. The task also included a substantial component of personal reflection on experience. Ultimately, barriers between the learning situation and the situation in which the learners apply their learning should be reduced, so that the transition to independence is facilitated.

Promote personalised goals

The second recommendation for future teaching practice is to encourage learners to identify goals which are of personal significance to them. Experience suggests that learners who are able to set personal goals for themselves are more likely to invest in course activities, and commit themselves to acquiring the skills they need. One learner in my writing workshop this trimester made a habit of spelling out highly detailed goals for each piece of writing he worked on. This had the advantage of enhancing his motivation and his self-directedness while he was completing the task, and providing him with benchmarks by which to measure his progress. Learners can be encouraged to set personal goals in various ways. Discussing other students' goal statements, analysing personal needs and taking part in focused interviews have all proved useful in our writing course.

Encourage reflection

My third recommendation is that teachers should encourage their learners to reflect. In each of the contexts described above, reflection led to insights which, in turn, led to action. However, the experience of stopping to think about what has been learned or achieved is not a familiar or comfortable experience for all. Therefore, reflective activities need to be introduced gradually and modelled extensively. Learners should also be presented with a clear rationale to justify the commitment of classroom time to such activities. The specific way in which reflection is promoted will vary with the context. The final piece of writing in our academic writing course is a structured reflection, which elicits learner views on various aspects of the course and on their own writing process. This is always the most interesting piece of writing produced by course participants. Here is what one of my students this trimester wrote in his reflection:

I do not think my writing skill was improved during this course, because six month is not long enough to see clear improvement. However, I realize that my awareness of what a good piece of writing has been improved during the course. Now I am more familiar with all aspects of writing than before. Therefore, when I write an essay next time, I will be less confused, and I will be able to complete the essay relatively more efficiently than before. It must be easier to correct errors, because now I know more about differences between good writing and bad writing.

This text suggests that the learner gained in awareness and in understanding as a result of the course, and that he is confident about using that new knowledge in the future. In fact, this learner produced very good pieces of writing throughout the course, but clearly he had not yet achieved his own personal goals. In this case, as in others observed on the writing course, reflection led to new understanding, which in turn led to the decision to take action.

Recommendations for research

Having reflected on the opportunities and constraints inherent in each of these contexts, I am now convinced of the need to study the way in which individual learners gain the confidence, knowledge and skill to begin taking independent decisions in relation to their learning. Longitudinal studies of foreign and second language learners could identify the experiences and insights which prompt them to decide for themselves what action to take and why, and could document changes in their learning behaviour. Such studies could provide responses to questions such as whether advanced language learners gradually assume greater responsibility for their learning, or whether independence is essentially an idiosyncratic characteristic.

It would also be useful to study the learning outcomes which result from the kinds of reflection recommended in this paper. In particular, to help us better describe independent language learning in different contexts, it would be useful to explore the links between insights gained through reflection and subsequent action taken. For example, learners could be invited to explain the reasons behind the decisions they make in relation to materials, strategies and tasks.

Finally, in the field of language teacher education, it would be useful to explore the beliefs which language teachers hold about language learning, and about how and when to intervene in the language learning process in order to facilitate language development. This kind of data could then inform the design of teacher education courses, making use of central teacher beliefs to stimulate discussion around new teaching practices.

Conclusion

By exploring the goals of my learners and my role as tutor in each of my three teaching contexts, I have been able to identify both similarities and differences. The differences observed lead me to suggest that definitions of learner independence, which are formulated in terms of universals, are not as useful as descriptions which are contextually determined. If we wish to support our learners in developing their learning independence, we need to begin with a thorough exploration of the context in which their learning takes place.

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About the author

Sara Cotterall's publications include articles on second language reading strategies, self-access language learning course design, learner discourse in language advising, learner beliefs about language learning and a book on learner autonomy in language learning. Over the past 5 years, Sara has developed a particular interest in the beliefs learners hold about language learning and has designed two questionnaires which she used in studies written up in her 1995 and 1999 *System* papers. She has recently co-authored a book on learner strategies.