

## Learning independently? Pedagogical and methodological implications of new learning environments

### *Keynote Address*

#### *Presentation notes*

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#### **Aims**

- To explore the significance of context for the development of independent learning
- To identify the need for appropriate pedagogical and methodological considerations, particularly in relation to the application of new technologies
- To begin to consider a framework for comparative exploration of issues in learner autonomy in language learning

#### **Technology, independence, autonomy**

- 1 Change, technology and education: control *of* technology or control *by* technology
- 2 Learners in the digital age: what do they expect?
- 3 Considering pedagogical implications: learning independently and learning autonomously
  - significance for effective learning and motivation (technical orientation of Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy and Little's (1991) definition of autonomy as a *capacity*)
  - *Independent learning* can be understood in terms of control as well as empowerment (Sheerin 1989 and 1997)
  - pedagogy for self-directed learning in the UK (SMILE, CIEL, rethinking pedagogical models for e-learning)
  - *Transforming Secondary Education: ICT for:*
    - engaging pupils - *Success is much more likely if pupils enjoy learning and if the curriculum and the way lessons are taught stimulates students and fires their imagination: e-learning and the appropriate use of ICT is key to this* (DfES, 2003: 43)
    - creating partnerships beyond the classroom (access to ICT for families; links with employers)
    - meeting individual learning needs
    - extending learning beyond the classroom (access to materials and assessment from home; Curriculum Online); technology and empowerment - *Perhaps the most telling contribution of e-learning is the individual empowerment it offers when properly integrated with other forms of learning and teaching. Teachers have always sought ways to encourage active, independent learning, but the traditional tolls at their disposal have limited them to the physical environment in which they teach ... ICT has the potential to engage disaffected pupils, to allow them to take control of their own learning by enabling interactive, individualised learning at the pace and level appropriate for them, and to give pupils and teachers new ways of being creative* (DfES, 2003: 47)
  - *Languages for All: Languages for Life - A Strategy for England* (DfES, 2002)
- 4 Principled and informed policy or *easy* answers? Considering contexts: economics, pupil disaffection and teacher shortage

#### **Questions:**

*How can new technologies support independent/autonomous learning?  
 What pedagogical and methodological considerations are needed?  
 How can our research community examine policy and practice critically and influence them?*

#### **Independent learning – what and why?**

States of flux in postmodernity: shifting notions of self/identity; shifting affiliation; interpretation; unclear boundaries; global networks and new technologies; reconsiderations of appropriateness; movement from binary ways of thinking eg: right/wrong, dependence /independence, adequacy/inadequacy. This is not, however, incompatible with notions of social justice (Griffiths 1998) eg: language learning in plurilingual contexts (Lamb 2001a).

Independent learning can thus mean many things, depending on context and the reasons for developing it. We therefore cannot evaluate (judge? learn from?) without being aware of the context: need for appropriate criteria, acknowledgement of own value system, cultural background, autobiography when interpreting, cannot always take at face value – may be a step *towards* something else even if apparently *inadequate* (autonomy as internal, private episodic (Dickinson 1996); *reactive* autonomy as a goal in its own right or possibility of progression to *proactive* autonomy (Littlewood 1996).

There will also be different pedagogical and methodological issues and needs according to such contexts and reasons.

### **So what reasons might there be?**

#### *Those which relate to the learner*

- autonomy as an educational goal, autonomy as universal capacity (Little 1999)
- individual differences eg: ability, personality, learning styles, motivations (Jiménez Raya and Lamb 2003)
- affect - fewer inhibitions; self-assessment for *learning*, differentiation leading to success leading to confidence/motivation
- individual learning needs eg: development of a specialist register at Hallam University
- autonomous learning skills as transferable key skills eg: planning, monitoring, evaluating, reflecting, decision-making, accessing and organising information - way of coping with explosion of knowledge
- languages as a key skill (less so in UK!)
- improvement in learning - the Good Language Learner: active involvement and improved metacognitive awareness
- improvement in motivation - intrinsic motivation involves autonomy, relatedness, and competence (*Deci et al. 1991: 327*), intrinsic motivation as ultimate aim of extrinsic motivation, choice and decision-making (Lamb 1996, 1998a and 2001b, Little 1989)
- access - distance learning provision, greater flexibility

#### *Those which relate to the teaching institution*

- expansion of provision
- diversification - response to market forces
- broader markets - more flexible, increased access for more students
- financial constraints - more economical
- teacher recruitment problems
- changes in language learning theory
- response to technological developments

#### *Those which relate to society*

- economic
- entrepreneurship eg: Malaysia (Lamb 1998b)
- right to European mobility
- rapidity of change – need for flexibility and new skills (life-long learning)
- citizenship - becoming an active participant in democratic decision-making
- voice and influence (political empowerment)
- social justice and inclusion
- cosmetic (low cost, high visibility)

We therefore need to examine the reasons/contexts critically and clarify values.

**Questions:**            *Why are we developing more independent modes of language learning and teaching in our own contexts?*  
                               *In which direction(s) are these developments moving?*  
                               *What kinds of pedagogy are implied by the different rationales?*  
                               *How can we encourage honest reflection on this to ensure appropriate pedagogies?*

**Pedagogical issues**

Benson's (1997) definitions of autonomy:

- Technical e.g.: strategy training, positivist, individualist
- Psychological e.g.: learner training, constructivist, individualist
- Political e.g.: empowerment, critical theory, control of content, social dimension, connection with real life, voice, critical pedagogy (see also Benson 1996, Lamb 2000a and 2000b, Littlejohn 1997, Pennycook 1997)

All forms of pedagogy have their place. If appropriate to the context, and we are aware of what they are actually doing. But need for this clarity. Need to theorise purpose, limitations, constraints etc and find spaces where learners *can* be autonomous (Lamb 2000). Otherwise danger of disillusionment in any learning environment (self-access centres, schools etc).

*Implications for the teacher*

Teacher-learners eg: need to experience autonomous learning themselves (McGrath 2000) and need to be committed to developing themselves (Smith 2000).

What issues need addressing in the teacher's role?

How can teachers be psychologically prepared – some more comfortable than others?

O'Dell (1997) has reported anxiety for a number of reasons:

- apprehension of student reactions
- own pedagogic skills
- getting familiar with the resources
- technology.

Beliefs are central – eg: not less work.)

What knowledge and skills do they need? Eg:

- technological confidence and understanding
- how to set up independent learning (design, resourcing, needs-analysis systems etc)
- what is counselling and when and how is it appropriate to intervene? (Carter 2001, Crabbe *et al* 2001, Pemberton *et al* 2001, Riley 1997, Kelly's 1996 *therapeutic dialogue*)

Many roles - what does a facilitator/resource etc do?

How does this role change if in-class and out-of-class learning are integrated with new technologies?

Can teachers encourage learner autonomy if they themselves are not autonomous or are constrained? (Sinclair *et al* 2000)

How can they *bend the rules*?

How does reflective practice compare with learner autonomy and to what extent is it a pre-requisite? (Vieira *et al* 2002)

Is reflective practice encouraged? (Lamb forthcoming 2003)

Critical reflection encouraged?

*Issues related to the learner*

How can they be psychologically prepared?

What other knowledge and skills do they need? eg: basic skills? ICT competence

How are roles shifting? eg: in area of assessing materials for appropriateness - Sturtridge's (1996) learner-teacher

How can we develop metacognitive knowledge and reflection?

Learner choice and learner voice: To what extent can learners make decisions based on their own needs? eg: negotiation (Voller 1997)

How is learner choice affected when there are constraints on choices eg: from the curriculum, examinations? (Lamb 1998a and 2000)

What are the implications for the learner's role in course development and research? How can they contribute their own existing expertise and experience, which may be greater than the teacher's?

*Implications for the whole curriculum*

How are new technologies integrated across the curriculum and in personal learning spheres?

Need to develop ability to work autonomously throughout life, not just as adults, and also throughout all aspects of learning.

How do we organise collaboration across the curriculum?

How can we underpin this with curricular guidelines?

How can we influence these guidelines in our different contexts?

How do we deal with increasingly prescriptive and competency-based curricula (UK, Israel)?

**The place and role of independent learning in the whole learning process**

How can independent learning/use of new technologies fit into the global study of a language?

Which stages of learning are more suitable for independent work?

Where does it complement/replace whole-class teaching and other forms of social learning?

What are optimum proportions of time to be spent in different working modes?

Littlewood (1997) has suggested that self-access is strongest for analytical learning and practice stages, whereas more productive, communicative work (acquisition/experiential) needs to be done in the social interactive context of the classroom.

Little (1989) has suggested that interaction could be with oneself or through use of technology.

E-learning unsuitable for soft-skill development such as team-building and communication (recent Institute for Employment Studies report).

Implication is that independent learning should not (where possible and appropriate) be aimed at the full continuum of language learning, though productive skills can be developed too according to Little.

*Connectedness*

How can independent learning/new technologies support or undermine *connectedness* (Ruddock *et al* 1996) and relatedness?

How is motivation affected?

*Evaluation*

How can we review/evaluate pedagogies?

Need to be aware of what is actually happening, the rationale behind, the potential outcomes and the limitations of the pedagogy.

What role do the learners play in such evaluation?

**Questions:**

*Which are the appropriate questions?*

*What other issues do we need to consider when new technologies and autonomy come together?*

*How does context influence pedagogy?*

**Some methodological issues**

Related to pedagogical issues, and thus to context. Important considerations – both in detail and in principle – without which systems can fail. *Given the nature of autonomy, it is absurd to talk about 'appropriate methods'* (Esch 1996:36).

*Systems*

Esch (1996) focuses on the learning environment rather than the methodology. Based on the self-access centre in Cambridge, she identifies five criteria for environments which enable rather than determine the development of autonomy – a *supportive environment for learner autonomy*: Choice, Flexibility, Adaptability and Modifiability, Reflectivity and Negotiability, Shareability.

Sturtridge (1997) identifies six factors:

Good management, Suitable location and facilities, Staff training and development, Learner training and development, Using the cultural strengths of the learners, Appropriate materials

What does independent learning look like?

How might it look different in the near future?

Will depend on context (Little 1989).

*Materials*

Debate around relationship between materials/software and promotion of learner autonomy.

Do they simply take on the teacher's role?

A number of areas for discussion in the literature:

Sheerin (1997): Questionnaires to clarify own beliefs about language learning and to challenge them,

Study advice on how to study without teaching materials, Guided discovery tasks based on authentic

data, Generic tasks, Student-generated materials, Fluency activities for pairs and groups (and peer evaluation guidelines)

### **Other key issues**

#### *Creativity:*

Criticism by Littlejohn (1997) that many tasks require low-level mental operations. Suggests need for materials which engage higher order thinking skills (analytical, critical, hypothetical, reflecting, affective areas).

Also Mueller–Verweyan (1999) – such materials are important if learners are to transfer strategies and metacognitive awareness to new learning contexts.

#### *Use of authentic materials*

Favoured by Little (1997).

Lees' (1996) research in Hong Kong showed that learners, in particular high-proficiency learners, favoured authentic materials. However, they do not aid learning as effectively as textbook, especially for weaker students, because students can feel bewildered or lack organisation. Implication is that we need to help them to use them properly.

#### *Use of published materials*

May need adapting (copyright issues) – issues of differentiation

#### *Learner training*

Strong arguments that learner training should be integrated into language learning rather than separate (Nunan 1997)

Explicitness in the materials (Sinclair 1996).

More authors (e.g.: Nunan et al 1999) tend to argue that it should also be more about raising awareness about strategies so that they can then decide what is appropriate, though some (Cohen 1999) prefer more interventionist materials which prescribe the *best* strategies. Former is more empowering, latter more about control.

#### *Use of technology*

Can also promote or constrain autonomy but need to be aware that simply using it does not mean that our learners are learning autonomously.

Is it meant to replace the determining control of the teacher over learning? Or can it empower learners?

Little (1996) sees three ways in which ICT can facilitate the development of learner autonomy:

Interaction *with* ICT (independence), Interaction *around* ICT (interdependence and reflection) and Interaction *via* ICT (interdependence and reflection).

Though seeing a role for independent interaction with ICT, Little (1997) typically emphasises the need for interaction in learning. Particularly positive about the potential of the internet for creating *virtual target language communities*.

#### *Assessment*

Appropriate forms of assessment: diagnostic, formative, summative? What forms of feedback are appropriate?

Integration of assessment: links into the reflective cycle of self-management (Flavell 1979, Wenden 1999)

Who assesses? Issues in self-assessment and peer assessment (e.g.: Millar and Ng 1996)

How can new technologies be used for assessment purposes?

How can we assess the full range of skills?

How can assessment reflect learning modes?

#### **Questions:**

*What other aspects of methodology need to be considered when developing learner independence/ using new technologies?*

*How do they relate to context?*

*In which ways might policy support successful independent learning methodologies?*

### **Towards a topography of learner independence and autonomy**

Why might we adopt a comparative perspective to our research?

- To support critical self-review and reflective practice

- To map out influences which have promoted and constrained the notion of autonomy as a means of professional development
- To understand the key variations and their origins, in the interpretation, theorisation and integration of independent/autonomous learning
- To empower colleagues to assert their voice and influence on policy developments
- To develop new methodological applications which will assist us in making comparative judgements

How can we make sense of context and its influences on the development of our field of study?

- By analysing the **topography** (broader context) of developments in independent/ autonomous language learning
- By exploring the **drivers** (socio-economic, theoretical, professional, political, educational, technological, biographical, psychological?) which propel developments
- By developing **new research methodologies** to enable us to interpret the above

### Future technologies

Mobile and personal: handheld PDAs with power of PC, linked up with GPS to provide information specific to time/place/person

Rich media content: usable video conferencing, interactive television, sharing rich media files between users, bringing TV/film/games into the online arena

Online communities: VMULE (Virtual Multi-User Learning Environment), multiplayer games environments

### Children growing up in the digital world (Facer *et al* 2003)

In the home...

- 88% have computers
- 75% have access to the internet
- 84% have mobile phones
- 69% play computer games each week
- 68% write on a computer each week

Learners in the digital generation:

- expect multiple information resources
- expect multi-modal communication
- expect to manage their own learning
- expect that learning will be relevant to their needs and interests
- expect rapid and personal feedback
- expect that learning will take place in networked communities

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