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| Title | Examining Definitions of Learner Autonomy |
| Author(s) | Aoki, Naoko |
| Citation | 阪大日本語研究. 10 P.129-P.148 |
| Issue Date | 1998-03 |
| Text Version | publisher |
| URL | http://hdl.handle.net/11094/8114 |
| DOI | |
| rights | |
| Note | |

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Examining Definitions of Learner Autonomy

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Key words : second language, autonomy, self-direction, definition

0. An issue

Arbitrariness is a property of language. Any concept can be given any name. However, use of the term 'autonomy' in second language research literature seems to have the following three problems, as some researchers have pointed out. (e.g. Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1995; Benson, 1996)

- 1) Researchers use the term with different definitions.
- 2) Some researchers do not define the term explicitly.
- 3) There are several other technical terms which are used sometimes interchangeably with autonomy and refer to a distinctly different concept at other times.

These problems sometimes blur the issues in their discussions. Arguments concerning, for example, how learner autonomy can be measured, whether learner training for learner autonomy is a viable concept, or whether autonomy is possible in a particular situation would all become meaningless unless we stand on the common ground of what exactly learner autonomy refers to. Indeed Holec (1985a) warns:

"(W)e should not allow the potential applications of autonomy to make us forget that it is essentially a conceptual tool and that to be used properly it must first of all be used as such: this is why anyone intending to 'use' autonomy needs first of all to have a clear idea of just what it involves." (ibid: 173)

In this article-I shall try to clarify explicit and implicit definitions of autonomy and related terms found in major research literature and discuss

differences among them. I shall also examine differences in *raison d'être* of autonomy claimed by the researchers, which I find are closely intertwined with the definitional problems.

1. Holec (1981) and (1985a)

It was Henri Holec who first introduced the term autonomy to the language teaching literature. Holec defines autonomy in the context of language learning as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981: 3) which is not inborn and must be acquired. For Holec an ability is "a power or capacity to do something" (ibid: 3), and autonomy as capacity is claimed to be necessary to carry out self-directed learning, which refers to the way in which the various modalities of the learning programme, objectives, contents, method, place, time and pace and evaluation, are determined by the learner himself as his own responsibility (Holec, 1985a: 174).

Capacity entails skills and knowledge directly related to determining the modalities above. Although Holec suggests that learners' attitudes towards production and consumption in the modern consumer society and beliefs about social distribution of knowledge and power might work as a brake on the acquisition of autonomy and suspects that learners' intellectual and affective potentials for self-examination might play an important role, these attitudes, beliefs and potentials do not seem to be included in autonomy itself.

Holec argues that "the logical relationship between the two (self-directed learning and autonomy) is clear: doing something implies knowing how to do it, but the reverse is not always true" (ibid: 188) and that "what separates being able to do something from doing it is the will to do it, and ... the will in question belongs to the learner" (ibid: 188). The C.R.A.P.E.L., of which he is director, doesn't make self-direction its objective, because "the imposition of self-direction would entail the imposition of autonomy" (ibid: 189). Holec sees a contradiction in the imposition of autonomy in that it presupposes

obedience to an external authority with the idea of the personal acceptance of responsibility. Although Holec states in the 1985 paper that the autonomous approach, i.e. an approach with autonomy as objective, is just one option available to the learners at the C.R.A.P.E.L., and does not discuss why autonomy can be important, he refers to a socio-political factor which gives autonomy a central role in education in the 1981 paper:

"The end of the 1960s saw the development in all so-called industrially advanced Western countries of a socio-political tendency characterized by a definition of social progress ... in terms of an improvement in the 'quality of life' ... based on the development of a respect for the individual in society. ... By reason of its function within the social structure, adult education has very quickly found itself involved in this movement. ... (T)he innovatory proposals relating to adult education policy ... insist on the need to develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him [sic] to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives. ... Thus the concept of 'autonomy has been born and has developed.'" (Holec, 1981: 1)

To recap, then, autonomy for Holec is conceived as a means to enable learners in adult education to take charge of their own learning, and to be free agents in the society in which they live. It is a capacity, not a behaviour or a set of behaviours, which is not inborn and needs to be developed. It is first and foremost a political goal. Respecting learners' individual freedom, however, leads to the thinking that it should be up to each learner to decide whether autonomy should be his or her goal of learning.

2. Dickinson (1987)

Dickinson (1987) uses the term 'autonomy' and 'self-direction' in a different way from Holec, as the author himself points out (*ibid*: 15). By autonomy Dickinson refers to "the situation in which the learner is totally

responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his (sic) learning and the implementation of those decisions" (ibid: 11), and sees it as a form of self-instruction, "a general cover term to make broad reference to situations in which learners are working without the direct control of a teacher" (ibid: 8). Dickinson claims that autonomy is at one end of the continuum in modes of self-instruction with programmed learning at the other (ibid: 9).

Autonomy in Dickinson (1987) can be said to be an identical concept to self-direction in Holec (1985a). Self-direction in the former work, however, seems to differ from autonomy in the latter. Dickinson defines self-direction as referring to "an attitude to learning in which the learner accepts responsibility for his learning but does not necessarily carry out courses of action independently in connection with it" (Dickinson, 1987: 11-12).

The term attitude has many definitions. One that is widely used is the tripartite model in which attitude consists of affect, cognition and behaviour (e.g. Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960). Greenwald (1989), on the other hand, define attitude as "the association of a mental representation with affect" (ibid: 438). Aronson (1992) claims that attitude is a type of belief which evaluatively describes the nature of an object. One element that is common to all is that it is evaluative. Although it is not clear in which sense Dickinson uses the term, it can be said that self-direction in his sense does not refer to the kind of knowledge and skills described in Holec (1985a) as components of autonomy. In other words a self-directed learner may think that it is good to accept responsibility for one's own learning, try to act responsibly in his or her learning, and have positive emotions about accepting the responsibilities, but he or she does not necessarily have the knowledge and skills involved in carrying out actual learning. It takes Holec's autonomous learner only the will to be self-directed. Dickinson's self-directed learner, however, may need to acquire the knowledge and skills to be autonomous. Dickinson seems to refer to the acquisition of this knowledge and skills as "learning how to learn," which I

shall discuss later.

To borrow Dickinson's analogy of learning with health care, Holec's sense of autonomy can be said to be a capacity to heal oneself without the direction of a doctor. Let us suppose I get sick. If every imaginable effort based on my knowledge about my body and alternative medicine fails and I decide to see a doctor, can I be said to be autonomous in Holec's sense? My will alone would not enable me to be in charge of my body. I lack the necessary knowledge and skills. Although I could be self-directed in Dickinson's sense as he argues (Dickinson, 1987: 12), autonomy, or a capacity for self-direction in Holec's sense, would not be possible unless I have direct access to more knowledge in my disease and its treatment. Indeed what Holec advocates by theorizing autonomy seems to be the redistribution of knowledge and power in the society, whereas Dickinson seems to be less radical in this respect. The difference seems to reflect the fact that Holec's basis of argument is the political milieu in France in the late 1960s as is suggested in Gremmo and Riley (1994: 153).

Dickinson (1987) extensively discusses why self-instruction can be desirable. He raises five major points: practical reasons, individual differences among learners, educational aims, motivation and learning how to learn foreign languages. Practical reasons refer to situations in which a learner is unable to attend classes or specific needs of a learner which no existing course accommodates. Under these circumstances learners have no alternatives other than learning on their own. Individual differences among learners include aptitude, cognitive styles and learning strategies. It is claimed that self-instruction can cater for a range of learner variables. Educational aims are divided into two categories. The first is learning efficiency, and self-instruction is said to help to develop learning strategies which improve efficiency of learning and to control affective factors which hinder or promote learning. The second aim of education is further divided into two elements. One is general

autonomy which is believed to protect democratic ideals by leading individuals to think for themselves. The other element is the need for continuing education in present day society. Motivation is thought to be enhanced by various factors in self-instruction; involvement in decision making, freedom to use preferred learning techniques, increased empathy between teacher and learners and among learners. Learners learn how to learn foreign languages through self-instruction. It contributes to the achievement of aims discussed above in relationship to the first four major points in desirability of self-instruction. It can also be considered to be "the most basic and important educational objective" (ibid: 34).

It might be worth noting that the concept of learning how to learn seems somewhat similar to Holec's development of autonomy. Dickinson argues:

"It (learning how to learn) is a matter first of developing knowledge about learning processes - and about oneself as a learner, secondly of planning learning, and thirdly of discovering and then using appropriate and preferred strategies to achieve the objectives specified by the plans." (ibid: 34)

Dickinson equates this ability to the concept of metacognition in Flavell (1979), which consists of metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experiences, goals (or tasks), and actions (or strategies). In Flavell's description, however, metacognitive knowledge "can be inaccurate" (ibid: 908). Learning how to learn should entail developing accurate knowledge about one's cognition. The ability to learn which is acquired as a consequence of learning how to learn should not be just metacognition, but well-developed metacognition.

Holec and Dickinson might actually refer to the same psychological process by development of autonomy and learning how to learn respectively. In fact Dickinson observes that "the role of the helper in the CRAPEL system is concerned chiefly with helping the learner to learn how to learn" (ibid: 45), whereas Holec argues that "the only possible intervention (by the teacher in the

process of acquiring autonomy) is support" (Holec, 1985a: 184). The difference between these two authors lies rather in the place they give to the concept which they label respectively "developing autonomy" and "learning how to learn". For Holec autonomy is the central socio-political issue in education. For Dickinson learning how to learn is an underlying prerequisite to self-instruction. This stance of Dickinson can be seen in his view that in communicative classrooms where learners are engaged in pair or small group work as an effective way to give learners opportunities to use the target language communicatively, learning how to learn a foreign language is a desirable prerequisite because learners must assume responsibility for their own learning (Dickinson, 1987: 34). A socio-political argument would reverse the logic: autonomy is necessary, therefore we have group work in the classroom. (cf. Brumfit, 1984: 71)

Although Dickinson does not refer to self-direction in his discussion of the reasons for self-instruction, he claims elsewhere that "the chances of success (of self-instructional modes) are greatly enhanced if the learner is self-directed" (ibid: 12). It can be said that in Dickinson's framework the importance of self-direction lies in this function.

To sum up, autonomy in Dickinson (1987) is a set of learner behaviours to make all decisions concerning one's own learning and to implement the decisions without direct control of teachers. Self-direction is a positive attitude towards taking responsibility concerning one's own learning. And learning how to learn concerns development of metacognition. These three terms are placed within the framework of self-instruction, which is thought to serve a wide range of purposes from solving practical problems to improving efficiency in learning and protecting democracy. On the whole Dickinson's argument seems to be less political than Holec's.

3. Wenden (1987) and (1991)

In her 1987 article Wenden does not explicitly define autonomy and seems to use the term interchangeably with self-direction as seen in the following sentence: "an explicit commitment to autonomous or self-directed learning is relatively new to the field of second language teaching and learning, especially in North America" (Wenden, 1987: 8). In fact, the author points out the fact that Knowles (1975) uses the terms autonomy and self-direction interchangeably and invites readers to have their own view of the operational definitions and the relationship of the two (*ibid*: 13). Wenden (1991) does not define autonomy itself either. The glossary, however, has the following entry:

"[an autonomous learner is] one who has acquired the strategies and knowledge to take some (if not yet all) responsibility for her language learning and is willing and self-confident enough to do so" (Wenden, 1991:163)

She also describes this willingness and self-confidence as "attitudes towards autonomy" (Wenden, 1991: 163)

Wenden defines attitude as having cognitive, evaluative and behavioural components, and claims that learners' beliefs about their role and capability as learners are central to their attitudes about autonomy and that those beliefs are a form of metacognitive knowledge (*ibid*: 54). Wenden seems to have modified the tripartite model (e.g. Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960) to exclude affect. Her definition is close to the one in Aronson (1992) in that it emphasizes the cognitive aspect of attitude.

It might be worth noting here that Wenden's use of the term metacognitive knowledge also seems to be idiosyncratic. Unlike Dickinson, she claims that her concept of metacognitive knowledge is different from the one in Flavell (1979) in that 1) it is a result of sweeping attribution, 2) it intrinsically contains evaluations, which predispose learners to certain actions, and 3) it is an integral part of learners' self-image and hard to change. (Wenden, 1991: 54-55)

Wenden's concept of metacognition, which includes learners' beliefs about their role, also seems to reflect a problem in the general research trend in metacognition. Brown (1987) extensively reviews research literature related with metacognition, and observes a range of denotations which researchers have given to the term. According to her, "metacognition refers loosely to one's knowledge and control of (one's) own cognitive system" (ibid: 66). Among the problems which this multifaceted meaning of metacognition induces, Brown points out, is the difficulty "to distinguish between what is meta and what is cognitive" (ibid: 66). Indeed it could be claimed that knowing about one's role should be considered as a matter of cognition, not metacognition because roles are social functions, and, strictly speaking, not part of psychological cognitive system.

Autonomy in Wenden (1991), then, is not a behaviour or a set of behaviours. It includes a capacity in Holec's sense for taking responsibility for one's own learning. It also entails positive attitudes, or "valued beliefs" (ibid: 54), about taking responsibility for one's own learning and one's own ability as a learner.

It may seem that this definition is Holec's autonomy and Dickinson's self-direction put together. Dickinson's attitude object is, however, the act of taking responsibility, whereas Wenden's includes that act and the learner's self. Wenden's implicit definition of autonomy seems to entail more than the sum of Holec's autonomy and Dickinson's self-direction.

This expansion of the concept of autonomy might be motivated by Wenden's criticism of Holec's projects as "mainly technical in their orientation" (Wenden, 1987: 12). She claims:

"Facility in the use of self-instructional techniques or strategies must be accompanied by an internal change of consciousness. ... together with the training in the use of strategies, the fostering of autonomy will require that learners become critically reflective of the conceptual context of their learning.

... learners will also need to learn to believe in their potential to learn and to manage their learning _and_ to be willing to assume more responsible role in the process." (ibid: 12; emphasis by the author)

Whether Wenden's criticism of Holec is a valid one or not is an interesting point to explore, but I shall not discuss it here. One thing that is clear, though, is that Holec and Wenden differ in their orientations. In the first chapter of her 1991 book Wenden observes among the trends in learner-centred language teaching practices efforts to change the learner or to make the learner a better learner, and notes that "writings describing this approach recommend that learner autonomy be included as an objective in language program" (Wenden, 1991: 2). In other words it can be said that Wenden thinks that the purpose of learner autonomy is to make the learner a better learner. This statement would obviously be unacceptable to Holec who claims that "'learning-to-learn' and 'making someone learn' are completely contradictory" (Holec, 1985a: 184). Wenden seems to be more interventionist as it were than Holec.

This again seems to reflect the socio-political nature of Holec's argument and the less political one of Wenden's. Indeed, although both discuss autonomy in the context of adult education, Wenden does not refer to the socio-political reason for autonomy, which is predominant in Holec (1981). Instead she follows Knowles (1976) and claims "attention should also be given to helping learners gain awareness of the need that they will have to continue learning the language on their own once they leave the classroom together with the skills they will need to do so" (Wenden, 1987: 9) in order to cope with the rapidly changing and ever diversifying present day society, and that "an adequate response to the educational needs of adult learners, including language learners, requires that this (adults') capability and desire for autonomy which is at the heart of much adult striving, be nurtured and developed" (ibid: 10). It might be safe to say that Wenden focuses more on the practical needs for continuing

education and the psychological propensity for autonomy among adult learners.

4. Benson (1996)

Benson (1996) observes that "as the concepts of autonomy in language learning have multiplied and become more complex, there has emerged a growing tendency to avoid issues of power and social change" (Benson, 1996: 34). He finds this tendency in three shifts in approaches to promoting autonomy: from situational to psychological, from social to individual and from meaning-orientation to task-orientation. He objects to these shifts by claiming that 1) "a psychological version of autonomy that emphasizes learners' responsibility for their own success and failures in learning could easily be used to support political doctrines of non-intervention and self-reliance" (ibid: 30), 2) Stressing individual learning styles and preferences and emphasizing individual choice over collaborative processes of decision-making "could lend support to doctrines of individualism that lead to social atomization and disempowerment" (ibid: 31), and 3) "in task-oriented approaches to learning both knowledge and language tend to be taken as given" (ibid: 31) and "to de-emphasize fundamental questions about the purposes and content of language learning" (ibid: 31), which "could be interpreted as a tendency to encourage passive acceptance of dominant ideologies of language learning" (ibid: 31). As "an attempt to rescue radicalism of autonomy in language learning" (ibid: 28) Benson proposes a critical version of autonomy. He argues:

"The issue of control lies at the centre of a critical approach to autonomy, operating at the three inter-related levels: control of the learning process, control of resources and control of language. I use the word control in preference to responsibility because it places an emphasis on the right to autonomy." (ibid: 31)

This can be paraphrased by saying that learner autonomy entails the right to take control of the learning process, resources and language. Control of

learning process involves "collective analysis of social context of learning" (ibid: 32), the aim of which is "for learners to establish 'subject positions' (Pierce 1989: 405) in relation to the functions of the language and the constraints that they imply so that they can make decisions about what and how they learn in the context of decisions about why they are learning the language" (Benson, 1996: 32).

To explain the importance of control of resources, Benson quotes Brookfield:

"inauthentic, limited form of self-direction is evident when our efforts to develop ourselves as learners remain at the level of philosophical preferences because the resources needed for action are unavailable or denied to us." (Brookfield, 1993:238)

Control of resources, it is argued, "may involve both direct control and a degree of critical awareness of resource constraints" (Benson, 1996: 32)

Control of language refers to "subject matter autonomy" (Candy, 1988), "a correlate of constructivist approaches which emphasize the creative element in learning and posit the ability to call into question the judgements of experts" -Benson, 1996: 33). Benson elaborates:

"In language learning context, native speakers might be considered as the experts in question, and subject matter autonomy as the learner's right to question native speaker judgement of normative appropriateness ... it can be said to define the goal of autonomous language learning as the negation of the teaching-learning distinction, or the transformation of the learner into a user or producer of language" (ibid: 32)

To achieve this version of autonomy, Benson contends, collective decision making "by individuals achieving consensus and acting in concert" (ibid: 33) is crucial.

What makes Benson's version of autonomy different from the three definitions of autonomy discussed above is that he defines it as a right. Benson also expands the scope of autonomy to include control of resources and language as well as learning process. Although it is true that it is only Benson who includes these two elements in the definition of autonomy itself, these ideas are not totally new as they may seem to be. Holec actually discusses institutional responsibilities to provide optimal conditions for autonomy to develop, which include the provision of "an infrastructure of materials and resources" (Holec, 1985a: 187). This point is closely related to Benson's concept of control of resources. Holec also refers to a French learner of English who, having chosen as his evaluation criterion the ability to amuse people, refused to correct errors and even deliberately made certain errors because he knew these errors would make people laugh, and asks "who could say he was wrong?" (Holec, 1985b: 272). This comment of Holec's again is not very far from Benson's concept of control of language. Rather what is unique to Benson is his claim that learners should be allowed to question why they need to learn the language. This can be thought to reflect the context in which Benson works where English, being a second language, enjoys a much higher social status than learners' first language. The emphasis on collective decision making also makes Benson's autonomy distinct from the others, although it is pointed out by other authors too that autonomy does not necessarily imply isolation (Holec, 1985a: 190; Dickinson, 1987: 13).

If Wenden's expansion of the concept of autonomy is psychological, Benson's is socio-political. Behind this lies Benson's view of the reasons for autonomy. He agrees with advocates of critical language pedagogy (Pierce, 1989; Pennycook, 1989; Benesch, 1993) who argue that "language learning and language teaching are intimately bound up with issues of power" (Benson, 1996: 31), and sees autonomy as a tool to engage both learners and teachers in critical work.

5. Little (1991), (1994), (1995), (1996a), (1996b) and (1996c)

In his theoretical work in learner autonomy (Little, 1991; 1994; 1995; 1996a; 1996b; 1996c), David Little seems to be trying to integrate definitions of autonomy found in the literature into a coherent framework. In his 1991 book Little states:

"Essentially, autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts." (Little, 1991: 4)

The capacity here can be thought of as Holec's autonomy plus the intellectual and affective potentials for self-examination discussed by Holec (1985a: 183-184). "A particular kind of psychological relation to the process" might be something similar to Dickinson's self-direction. What "the relation to the content" refers to is not very clear, but it might mean learner's view of what they are learning. Little is probably claiming that learners need to find the content as relevant to their needs and interests. It is supposed that by using the two verbs, to presuppose and to entail, in a sentence Little means that the psychological relation is necessary for the development of autonomy, but that the relation also develops as autonomy develops. Whether this relation is considered to be part of autonomy or not is, however, ambiguous in this definition.

The definition in Little's 1994 paper is much simpler:

"The essence of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning (Holec, 1981:3). This entails establishing a personal agenda for learning, taking at least some of the initiatives that shape the learning

process, and developing a capacity to evaluate the extent and success of one's learning. From this definition it follows that learner autonomy entails not only learning, but learning how to learn." (Little, 1994: 431)

What Little is saying here is basically that autonomy is what Holec has defined and that the concept of learning how to learn is part and parcel of autonomy itself. One seeming difference from Holec is that Little appears to include in the concept of autonomy some behaviours as well as capacities. This modification seems to reflect Little's thinking that the capacity to take responsibilities can only be developed by exercising the responsibilities as seen in the following:

"In formal educational contexts, the *_basis_* of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning; the *_development_* of learner autonomy depends on the exercise of that responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degree of success; and the *_effect_* of learner autonomy is to remove the barriers that so easily erect themselves between formal learning and the wider environment in which the learner lives." (Little, 1996c; emphasis by the author)

In the plenary talk given at the Autonomy in Language Learning conference held in 1994 Little seems to try to separate more clearly a core definition of autonomy from conditions necessary for its development. He maintains:

"The essence of autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning... This *_entails_* establishing a personal agenda for learning, taking at least some of the initiatives that shape the learning process, and developing a capacity to evaluate the extent and success of one's learning. According to this definition, learner autonomy has both affective/motivational and metacognitive dimensions. It *_presupposes_* a positive attitude to the purpose, content and process of learning on the one hand and well-developed metacognitive skills on

the other." (Little, 1996b: 203-204; emphasis added)

Here Little seems to explicitly state that attitudinal aspect is, though prerequisite to autonomy, not included in the concept of autonomy itself. The "positive attitude" can be considered as equal to the "particular kind of psychological relation" in Little (1991), although one attitude object, purpose, is added in this version.

What is meant by metacognitive skills is, however, somewhat vague. If we follow Brown (1987), metacognitive here can be thought as concerned with "activities to regulate and oversee learning" (ibid: 68), which consists of planning, monitoring, and checking outcomes. What, then, is the difference between these skills and "a capacity to evaluate the extent and success of one's learning"? Little (personal communication) elaborates on this point that he distinguishes between metacognition and self-evaluation as on-line and off-line processing. In other words metacognitive skills are those skills required to perform learning tasks efficiently, and self-evaluation is the skill to step back from the learning process and evaluate the process and progress.

In another paper, however, Little writes:

"The basis of learner autonomy is that the learner accepts responsibility for his or her learning. This acceptance of responsibility has both socio-affective and cognitive implications: it entails at once a positive attitude to learning and the development of a capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning with a view to bringing them as far as possible under conscious control." (Little, 1995: 175)

Here learners' attitudes and metacognitive capacity seems to be considered as part of learner autonomy.

Concerning the reasons for autonomy, Little describes the argument proposed by Holec as moving "from the outside in" (Little, 1994: 432), although he does not deny its force in the present time and observes the need

for the capacity to learn new languages to cope with potential mobility. Little's claim is that in developmental and experiential learning humans are always autonomous and that exploiting this capacity for learning would help remove the barriers between formal learning and learners' everyday life. (Little, 1994; 1996a)

This argument of Little's might seem to be an example of "the shift from situational to psychological" (Benson, 1996). In the paper titled "The politics of learner autonomy", however, he examines the concept of learner autonomy in relation to educational philosophy, pedagogy in general, and language teaching in particular, and contends that "the challenge of learner autonomy is essentially and inescapably political, and that its unique value is to pose this challenge at every level and every stage of our educational systems" (Little, 1996a: 7). Quoting Janne who claims that adult education "becomes an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man [sic], and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself" (Janne, 1977; cit. Holec, 1981: 1), Little claims that educational philosophy which advocates learner autonomy as Janne does implies "a symbiotic relation between education and society" (Little, 1996a: 7). The argument concerning how learner autonomy can be developed in pedagogical practice assumes psychological dimensions, but it does not, Little contends, mean that the political argument then disappears, because "the psychological argument challenges traditional educational structures and power relationships" (ibid: 8) in that, according to Little, it tries to bridge the gap between "school knowledge" and "action knowledge" (Barnes, 1976) and to bring into focus the kind of intelligences (Gardner, 1993a; 1993b) which traditional educational systems have not been designed to accommodate. Translation of the general pedagogical argument about autonomy into language teaching practice requires some reconceptualization concerning what language learning is about, thus the issue remains political.

To summarize, autonomy in Little's writings is a capacity and a practice, partial as it may be, to take responsibility of one's own learning. Successful developmental and experiential learning outside the formal educational context is claimed to be always autonomous, and autonomy in the formal educational context is considered to be the means to bridge the gap between formal learning and learners' lives. Learners' positive attitude towards the purpose, the process and the content of their learning and their well-developed metacognitive capacity are prerequisite to and components of autonomy.

6. In concluding

In this paper I have tried to clarify the definitions of learner autonomy used in major research literature in second language education. The discrepancies can be summarized in the following seven points.

1. Is learner autonomy capacity or behavior?
2. How does learner autonomy differ from self-direction, learning to learn and independence?
3. Is learner autonomy a learners' right or responsibility?
4. What does learner autonomy expect learners to take control of?
5. What does learner autonomy as a capacity entail?
6. What does attitude refer to if it is part of learner autonomy?
7. What does metacognition refer to if it is part of learner autonomy?

It has not been my purpose to make any value judgement of existing definitions. I do not think that a claim for validity of any definition of learner autonomy can be made without considering the social context each researcher works in. A single authoritative definition would not probably be possible nor desirable. It can be said, however, that succinct elaboration on the denotation of the terms we use and careful reading of existing literature in and outside of the field of second language education are required in order to produce any constructive discussion.

Acknowledgement:

My deepest appreciation goes to David Little who read an earlier version of this article and provided valuable comments. Any shortcomings of the present paper are of course mine.

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