Learner autonomy, inner speech and the European Language Portfolio

David Little

Trinity College, Dublin

Abstract

Learner autonomy is currently one of the most widely discussed concepts in second language pedagogy and a common goal of second language curricula. It also underlies the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001), whose scales of communicative proficiency define the autonomous second language learner–user. And its development is one of the key purposes of the European Language Portfolio, which the Council of Europe presents as "a tool to promote learner autonomy" (Council of Europe 2006: 9).

It is generally accepted that reflection is a key constituent of learner autonomy: autonomous learners are characterized by their active involvement in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of their learning. Indeed, it is in precisely these terms that the Council of Europe explains what it means by the phrase "a tool to promote learner autonomy" (ibid.). It is much less generally accepted, however, that these reflective processes should be conducted as far as possible in the target language (but see Little 2001, 2007). This paper will argue that using the target language for reflective purposes is central to *language* learner autonomy since it plays an essential role in developing learners' capacity for L2 inner speech, which in turn is an essential component of communicative proficiency.

I shall begin by explaining what I understand by learner autonomy, drawing on dialogical theories of child development, language and learning. Within this conceptual framework I shall go on to consider the phenomenon of inner speech, the different forms it takes and the different functions it fulfils. And I shall then discuss the role of inner speech in second language learning and teaching, with particular reference to the form and pedagogical functions of the European Language Portfolio.

Keywords: learner autonomy, the European Language Portfolio, inner speech, CEFR

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is currently one of the most widely discussed concepts in L2 pedagogy and a common goal of L2 curricula. There is general agreement in the literature that the basis of learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981: 3), but no general agreement as to the pedagogical measures most likely to secure its development. This may help to explain why learner autonomy remains an elusive achievement. It also prompts the question: How can we make it less so?

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One of stated goals of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) is to foster the development of learner autonomy (the others are to promote intercultural awareness and plurilingualism). From the first the ELP was conceived as a mediation tool for the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), which sees language learning as a variety of language use (ibid.: 9) and describes what the autonomous language user can do in the target language at different levels of proficiency. The question arises: How exactly can the ELP help to foster the development of learner autonomy?

In this article I propose answers to these two questions with reference to inner speech, the language that we produce in our heads without vocalisation. Inner speech is sometimes involuntary, sometimes intentional; often fragmentary, sometimes elaborated. The capacity for inner speech links language to thought, though not necessarily directly, and a developed capacity for L2 inner speech – an ability to think in the target language – is a defining characteristic of the truly proficient (and autonomous) L2 learner–user. Accordingly I shall argue that developing the learner's capacity for L2 inner speech should be an explicit goal of L2 pedagogy.

2. Learner autonomy

There are two senses in which human beings are autonomous. The first is biological in origin and refers to our inner life: we are all autonomous in the sense that our perception of and response to the world around us is ours alone; our thoughts and emotions can never be directly accessible to parents, siblings, caregivers, friends, lovers, colleagues etc. The second sense is behavioural and refers to our social selves: within the limits of our genetically determined ability, personality and potential, developmental and experiential learning gradually enlarges our capacity for autonomous behaviour, which in turn enhances our ability to contribute to the interdependent processes of human society. The American social psychologist Edward Deci has argued that autonomy in this second, social sense is a fundamental human need: in order to have a sense of self-fulfilment we need to feel autonomous, or "volitional in our actions" (Deci 1996: 66). Deci also proposes that our sense of self-fulfilment depends on two other needs: competence, or an ability to confront and overcome "optimal challenges" (ibid.), and relatedness, a feeling that we are "connected with others in the midst of being effective and autonomous" (ibid.: 88). According to this view of human motivation, the freedom

that autonomy entails is confirmed by our competence and constrained by our relatedness.

When we set out to promote the autonomy of individuals in formal learning contexts, we take account of the fact that each learner is cognitively autonomous, and we seek to exploit the motivational advantage of having learners set and follow their own agenda so that they are "volitional" in their learning. But whereas the general growth of social or behavioural autonomy is something of which the individual may or may not become consciously aware, the development of autonomy in contexts of formal learning is always explicit because formal learning itself depends on explicit plans and procedures. Thus conscious reflection is fundamental to the growth and exercise of autonomy in formal learning.

If language learning is a variety of language use, the autonomous language learner is also an autonomous language user; and from this it follows that the scope of the individual's autonomy as a language learner is always necessarily constrained by the scope of his or her proficiency as a language user. What is more, if success in language learning depends on language use, the target language must be the principal medium of learning. Learners must gradually be drawn into the widest possible range of discourse roles, initiating as well as responding, and pedagogy must also seek to develop their capacity for internal as well as external language use – communicating inwardly with themselves as well as outwardly with others.

These considerations have led me to propose (Little 2007) that success in autonomy-oriented L2 pedagogy depends on the operationalisation of three interacting pedagogical principles, of learner involvement, learner reflection, and target language use. The principle of learner involvement entails that we help learners to take charge of their own learning by engaging them fully in planning, monitoring and evaluation; the principle of learner reflection, already implied by the principle of learner involvement, entails that we help learners to engage reflectively with the process and content of their learning; and the principle of target language use entails that we help learners to use the target language as the medium of task performance but also of metacognition and metalinguistic reflection. Between them, these three principles take account of the affective, metacognitive/metalinguistic and communicative dimensions of language learning.

It is important to conclude this brief introduction to the concept of language learner autonomy by insisting that although it may remain a minority achievement, it is

nevertheless a well-documented reality – for example, in the teaching of English in a Danish middle school (Dam 1995, 2000, Thomsen and Gabrielsen 1991, Thomsen 2000, 2003), of English and French in Norwegian secondary schools (Aase *et al*. 2000), of French, German, Spanish, Italian and Irish as extracurricular subjects at Trinity College Dublin (Little and Ushioda 1998), of English as a second language in Irish primary and post-primary schools (Lazenby Simpson 2003, Little and Lazenby Simpson 2004a), and of English as a second language to adult immigrants to Ireland (Little, Lazenby Simpson, and O'Connor. 2002, Little 2009).

3. Inner speech and learner autonomy

Our L1 is both an instrument of communication and the tool we use for discursive thinking. Inner speech – the act of silently talking to ourselves – takes many different forms, ranging from fragmentary to fully elaborated, and we use it for many different purposes, for example, to access and shape our memories, to plan utterances, to guide ourselves through complex tasks, to regulate our behaviour, and to solve problems. Inner speech also plays an essential role in our conscious lives. Morin (2004) argues that there are three sources of self-awareness: the physical world, from which we differentiate ourselves; the social environment, which teaches us perspective-taking; and the mental processes of proprioception and reflection. Inner speech is the medium of these latter processes: "within the self, inner speech and imagery (both cognitive factors) can internally reproduce social mechanisms responsible for self-awareness" (ibid.: 116), and this makes inner speech and imagery the most important contributors to self-awareness.

Our capacity for thought and our capacity for communication are interdependent, as a number of researchers have argued (I owe these references to Morin 2004):

> "Human mental life is normally dominated by an ongoing interior monologue that is closely linked to the productive capacity for language and forms the basis for the generative mechanism of self" (Dimond 1980, cit. Miller 1991: 224).

> "The communicative origin of consciousness is the source of the capacity to hold a meaningful dialogue with oneself, i.e., it produces self-awareness (Simonov 1999: 380)".

> "[Grammatical language] can also be used as a way to "listen to oneself", in other words to have an inner voice through which a self-model can be constructed and tested (Steels 2003: 183–4)".

According to Vygotsky, "Inner speech develops through a long cumulative series of functional and structural changes. It branches off from the child's external speech with the differentiation of the social and the egocentric functions of speech. Finally, the structure of speech that the child masters becomes the basic structure of his thinking" (Vygotsky 1987: 119–20). In other words, the child first learns social speech in communication with others; then she learns to use speech not only in social interaction but for communication with herself in the performance of tasks and the solving of problems (this egocentric speech is "internal in its mental functions, external in its structure" (ibid.: 260)); and finally the function of egocentric speech is internalised as inner speech.

Vygotsky (ibid.: 221) had this to say about the difference between L1 and L2 learning:

> "The development of the native language moves from below to above; the development of the foreign language moves from above to below. With the native language, the lower, more elementary characteristics of speech arise first. Its more complex forms develop later in connection with conscious awareness of its phonetic structure, its grammatical forms, and its volitional use. With a foreign language, it is the higher, more complex characteristics of speech that develop first, those that are associated with conscious awareness and intention. The more elementary characteristics of speech, those associated with the spontaneous and free use of speech, develop later".

This is a clear recognition of the fact that whereas L1 learning is an integral part of biologically driven child development, L2 learning in formal contexts is intentional and cannot repeat developmental processes. If (as I claimed in my introduction) the capacity for inner speech is a defining characteristic of the truly proficient L2 learner-user, the challenge facing language pedagogy is twofold: to find a means of activating and feeding those processes that are common to all language learning, but at the same time

to turn the intentional nature of L2 learning to positive advantage. The methods and techniques of the autonomous classroom were developed as a response to this challenge.

In the autonomous classroom as documented, for example, by Dam (1995) and Thomsen (2000, 2003), learning proceeds on the basis of project cycles that are divided into four phases (Legenhausen 2003: 68):

1. Planning and negotiation that takes account of curriculum requirements and accumulated learning experience, ideas and activities: groups are formed and projects are identified.
2. Groups decide what they are going to work on, set goals, define outcomes, and assign responsibilities within the group.
3. Projects are researched, drafted, revised, and prepared for "publication" in the classroom.
4. After "publication" projects are evaluated by individual learners, groups and the whole class: To what extent have goals been achieved? How successfully did the group work? How effective was the individual learner's contribution to the project? How did the project promote learning? What was learnt (a) in terms of the target language and (b) about learning?

From a pedagogical perspective the project cycle is shaped by the principles of learner involvement, learner reflection, and target language use, pursued in a thoroughly integrated way: the target language is the medium of learner involvement and learner reflection. From a discourse perspective the successive procedures of the project cycle are characterised by close interaction between speaking and writing, dialogue and monologue, and by alternation between creative/productive and reflective phases.

The process of negotiation that determines group membership and choice of theme is recorded schematically on posters, which can be returned to for reference, further elaboration and adjustment: speaking is captured in writing that provides a springboard for further speaking. The projects themselves always yield a written product – for example, a narrative, descriptive or analytical text; the script of a short play; a poem or song. This written product emerges gradually from collaboration that draws on written notes and documents of various kinds: speaking, sometimes in dialogue and sometimes in monologue, generates writing. Finally, learners maintain an individual journal in which they record, monologically but in dialogue with themselves, their learning activity and reflect on the ongoing learning process.

In the autonomous, project-driven classroom everything is reflection (metacognition and metalinguistics) because everything is laid out for examination and analysis in the continuous interaction between speaking and writing, writing and speaking: negotiation of initial plans; acceptance of responsibility and accountability; the interactive processes of project development, with false starts, second thoughts, renegotiation of objectives, and monitoring and revision of the emerging product; evaluation of class, group and individual learning outcomes.

De Guerrero (2004) reports on an experiment to track the development of L2 inner speech. For four months a group of sixteen beginning ESL college students kept a diary recording their experience of L2 inner speech both during class and outside the classroom (de Guerrero 2004). They reported four main types of inner speech, in descending order of frequency: concurrent processing of language they were hearing or reading; recall of language they had heard, read or used; preparation before speaking or writing; silent verbalisation of thoughts for private purposes. This finding confirms a common sense view of the way in which the capacity for inner speech develops in L2: first as an instrument of "shadowing", then as an instrument of recall, then as a support for speaking and writing, and finally as a medium of discursive thinking. It also reflects the processes that the pedagogical approach and discourse characteristic of the autonomous classroom are calculated to support. Just how successful this approach can be is illustrated by self-evaluations that two Danish learners of English wrote in their target language at the end of four years of learning (Dam and Little 1999: 134):

> "Most important is probably the way we have worked. That we were expected to and given the chance to decide ourselves what to do. That we worked independently … And we have learned much more because we have worked with different things. In this way we could help each other because some of us had learned something and others had learned something else. It doesn't mean that we haven't had a teacher to help us. Because we have, and she has helped us. But the day she didn't have the time, we could manage on our own".
>
> "I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And

> I think that our "together" session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent".

4. The European Language Portfolio

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has three obligatory components. The language passport captures linguistic identity, with a particular focus on second and foreign languages, summarises language learning and intercultural experience, and records the owner's periodic self-assessment against the CEFR's self-assessment grid (Council of Europe 2001: 26–27). The language biography provides "I can" checklists to support goal setting and self-assessment and stimulates reflection on the language learning process, cultural similarities and differences, and the owner's evolving plurilingual/pluricultural identity. And the dossier is where the learner keeps work in progress and evidence of language learning achievement.

In principle the ELP can support the exercise and development of learner autonomy in three ways. First, when "I can" checklists reflect the demands of the official curriculum, they provide learners (and teachers) with an inventory of learning tasks that they can use to plan, monitor and evaluate learning over a school year, a term, a month or a week. Secondly, the language biography is explicitly designed to associate goal setting and self-assessment with reflection on learning styles and strategies and the cultural dimension of L2 learning and use. This general reflective tendency is reinforced by the fact that using the ELP is a matter of writing things down. Thirdly, when the ELP is presented (partly) in the learners' target language, it can help to promote the use of the target language as medium of learning and reflection. This is especially true when the checklists are available in the target language.

It is important to stress that the ELP is intended to be an "open" document – this is reflected in the fact that most models are presented in a loose-leaf binder. So if language biography pages that invite reflection on learning strategies seem to leave out things that are important to a particular learner, he can easily add one or more pages of his own to make good the omission. And a teacher who has previously used open-form learning diaries can adapt the dossier section to serve the same purpose. In other words, the ELP helps learners to manage their learning and teachers to manage their teaching, and it does so with explicit reference to the CEFR's L2 proficiency scales, but it is not a straitjacket.

Empirical studies of the ELP in use confirm that it supports the approach to L2 teaching and learning I described in the previous section (see, e.g., Ushioda and Ridley 2002, Little and Lazenby Simpson 2004b). According to the novelist Philip Pullman (2004: 5), reading a book is like taking part in a conversation: "There's a back-and-forthness about it. The book proposes, the reader questions, the book responds, the reader considers". Much the same might be said about long-term use of the ELP – the book of my language learning – except that now the conversation I have is with myself, because I am the author as well as the reader: I propose *and* question, respond *and* consider. This never-ending dialogue with myself, driven forward by the cycle of goal setting, monitoring and self-assessment, is not straightforwardly linear. My language passport, however recently updated, always refers to the past; the dossier in which I keep samples of what I can do in my L2s is an eternal present; and, mediating between passport and dossier, my language biography is the present in which every moment of reflection immediately becomes the past. The ELP stimulates the inward and outward processes of reflection, negotiation and communication by which my language learning proceeds; and by capturing those processes it provides a basis for further reflection, negotiation and communication and a powerful spur to the continuing development of my capacity for L2 inner speech.

5. Conclusion

The pedagogical approach I have described in this article uses L2 talk to generate L2 writing and L2 writing to stimulate L2 talk; both techniques encourage L2 thinking or inner speech. The approach is a close relative of interpretative teaching and exploratory learning as they have been promoted in L1-medium education, respectively by Douglas Barnes (1976) and Jerome Bruner (1986). Of particular relevance is Bruner's argument that one of the functions of the "language of education" is to facilitate the learner's "reflective intervention in the knowledge he encounters" (ibid.: 132). The approach also finds strong echoes in more recent research into L1 classroom learning that follows broadly sociocultural (Vygotskyan) principles, for example, Neil Mercer's (1995) notion of "the guided construction of knowledge" and Neil Mercer and Karen Littleton's (2007) empirical exploration of classroom discourse as "thinking together".

When this pedagogical method is transferred to L2 learning, the key task is to find ways of scaffolding learners' L2 talk at all levels of proficiency, from beginner to advanced: drawing them into the language in order to draw the language out of them.

Such a method implies a non-traditional role for textbooks: no longer a series of lesson scripts but a linguistic (thematic and functional, lexical and grammatical) quarry. It also implies a central role for the ELP as a tool for structuring and managing learning. In particular, the process pages of the language biography (learning how to learn, the intercultural dimension) can be used to stimulate reflective talk and writing by the whole class, by learners working in groups or by individual learners; while the dossier can be structured to serve as a learning journal as well as a display cabinet.

Finally it is necessary to acknowledge that L2 inner speech is relatively little investigated (but see de Guerrero 1994, 1999, 2004, 2005). Certainly it has not been systematically explored within a pedagogy that uses exploratory, reflective talk and writing in the way that I have described. The ELP offers a means not only of supporting that pedagogy but of framing the systematic exploration of learners' developing capacity for L2 inner speech.

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