

Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: principles for designing language courses

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This article argues that fostering learner autonomy is an important and appropriate goal in language course design, but that principles to guide the design of such courses are currently lacking. The article proposes five course design principles for language courses which seek to foster learner autonomy. Each principle is discussed in relation to the experience of designing two skills-based courses taught within an intensive English language course. The paper concludes with the claim that a language course which integrates these principles will contribute both to learners' control over their own language learning process and to their developing language proficiency.

Introduction

Many language teachers are convinced of the importance of incorporating principles of learner autonomy—'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec 1981: 3)—into their practice. The applied linguistics literature also bears testimony to interest in this issue, with at least four collections of papers on learner autonomy appearing in the last four years (Dickinson and Wenden 1995, Pemberton *et al.* 1996, Benson and Voller 1997, and Cotterall and Crabbe 1999). Yet many of the contributions in these collections deal principally with the theoretical background of learner autonomy, and the role played by learner variables such as attitudes, beliefs, strategies, and roles. It is considerably less common to read reports of classroom-based courses which integrate principles of learner autonomy in their design. In a recent article on learner autonomy in *ELT Journal*, for example, Lee (1998) reports on a voluntary self-directed learning programme which seeks to help learners become more autonomous. But what of mainstream courses dedicated to the same principles?

This article argues that learner autonomy should not be seen as a goal only for highly committed students completing optional courses, or for students operating within selected educational or cultural contexts. Rather, it should be seen as an essential goal of all learning. Littlewood (1999: 73) comments:

If we define autonomy in educational terms as involving students' capacity to use their learning independently of teachers, then autonomy would appear to be an incontrovertible goal for learners

everywhere, since it is obvious that no students, anywhere, will have their teachers to accompany them throughout life.

Language courses which aim to promote learner autonomy will incorporate means of transferring responsibility for aspects of the language learning process (such as setting goals, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating progress) from the teacher to the learner. In what follows, two such courses are described and evaluated in terms of their ability to foster learner autonomy. As a result of the experience gained in designing and delivering the courses, five principles to guide the design of similar language courses are proposed. These are generic course design principles which can be applied to a range of learners and settings.

In the next section, the context for which the language courses were designed is briefly described. Then the rationale for each principle is outlined, followed by a report on the experience of attempting to incorporate the principles in the two courses. Finally, the paper discusses the potential contribution of principles such as these to our understanding of strategies for promoting learner autonomy is discussed.

Context The courses described here were designed for a group of 20 learners drawn from five classes of learners enrolled on a 12-week intensive English language course at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. The learners attended class for three hours every morning with their class teacher, and then attended a course in an area of special interest (or need) for two hours one afternoon each week for five weeks in each half of the course. The two special interest courses described here focused on speaking and reading skills respectively.

The promotion of learner autonomy is an important explicit goal of the language programme within which the courses were offered (see Cotterall 1995 for more detail). The challenge of designing these courses lay in identifying content which, within a ten-hour period, would enhance learners' control over their language learning in relation to the skill focused on. Other relevant constraints in the context included the learners' high expectations, their relatively low English proficiency, the wide range of nationalities represented in the group, and the diverse goals of the participants.

**Principles of
language course
design: the theory**

The five principles which emerged from the course design process relate to (1) learner goals, (2) the language learning process, (3) tasks, (4) learner strategies, and (5) reflection on learning. The challenge facing course designers who wish to foster learners' ability to 'take charge of . . . [their] . . . learning' (Holec 1981: 3) is to find ways of supporting the transfer of responsibility for decision-making about learning from teacher to learner. Each of the principles discussed here contributes to that transfer of responsibility.

The course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies

Any course designed to promote learner autonomy must set out to achieve the goals which the learners deem important. Breen and Candlin (1980: 95) comment:

However vague a learner's initial interpretation [of the demands of the target repertoire and its underlying competence] may be, he is not going to learn anything unless he has an idea of what he is trying to achieve.

Therefore, in a course which seeks to foster language learners' autonomy, time is devoted to raising learners' awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives, identifying resources and strategies needed to achieve goals, and measuring progress. Decisions about language, texts, tasks, and strategies to focus on during the course are made in relation to the stated goals of the learners.

Course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process

A basic understanding of the language learning process is essential for anyone who wishes to manage their own learning. Learners can only be autonomous if they are aware of a range of learning options, and understand the consequences of choices they make. Armed with a model of language learning, learners are able to question the role of input texts and tasks, to trial alternative strategies, and to seek feedback on their performance. Without access to such a model, learners are forced into the role of 'consumers' of language courses.

Course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks

This principle is related to the first one. Learners enrol in language courses in order to improve their performance of certain L2 tasks. Their goals and needs must therefore be paramount in the design of any course which seeks to develop their ability to manage their own learning. This means that the tasks in which the course provides preparation, practice, and feedback should be those in which the learner will participate in the future. Such 'transparency' of course content is the hallmark of courses designed to foster learner autonomy.

The course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance

The recent explosion of interest in learning strategies has provided language teachers with suggestions as to which learning strategies to present and, more importantly, empirical justification for spending time with learners discussing and experimenting with such strategies. At the heart of learner autonomy lies the concept of choice. This principle relates particularly to extending the choice of strategic behaviours available to learners, and to expanding their conceptual understanding of the contribution which strategies can make to their learning.

The course promotes reflection on learning

In a recent report, Dam and Legenhausen (1999: 90) claim that learners' ability to reflect critically on their learning is a measure of the effectiveness of the learning environment. They use the term 'evaluation' to refer to the metacognitive activity of reviewing past and future learning experiences in order to enhance learning, and claim that:

In an autonomous classroom . . . [evaluation] is viewed as the pivot of a good learning/teaching cycle . . . Evaluation has a retrospective and prospective function, in which the learning experiences of the past are reflected upon and transformed into plans for future action.

The potential for learner autonomy increases as an individual's learning awareness grows. Therefore activities which prompt learners to reflect on their learning aim to enhance learners' insight into their learning processes.

***Principles of
language course
design: the
practice***

Now that the rationale for each principle has been briefly explained, the next section will report on the experience of attempting to integrate these principles in the design of two short courses.

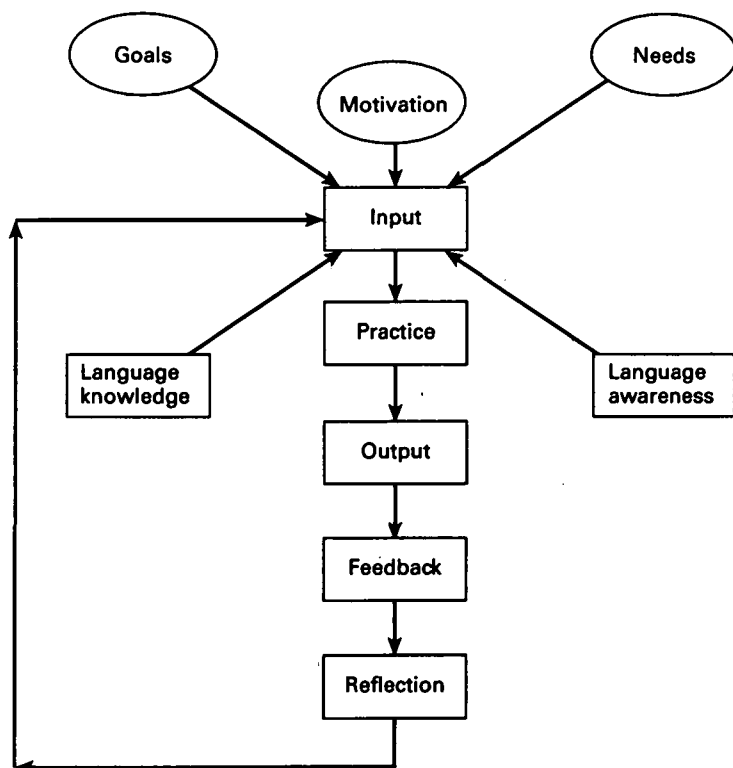
The course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies

In both courses, learners' goals were a principal focus in the first session and featured in discourse surrounding all tasks. In the initial session, learners were asked to specify detailed reading or speaking goals, to identify appropriate resources, and to formulate measures for determining when their goals had been reached. In practice, this process uncovered some unrealistic goal setting. While working with one learner—a surgeon who had recently emigrated to New Zealand—I discovered that his goal for the reading course was to acquire the ability to read scientific articles in English. While this goal was relevant and important, it was highly unrealistic given the size of his English vocabulary, his limited experience of dealing with authentic texts, and the duration of the course. After talking to me further about his goals and his current proficiency, the learner decided to focus initially on simplified materials while expanding his sight vocabulary and increasing his reading speed. This change in goals did not harm the learner's motivation; rather, it enhanced it, by ensuring that he experienced early success, and by identifying some way stages in the journey towards his more long-term goals.

The peer interviews revealed that few learners had experience of goal-setting or of monitoring or evaluating their learning, and that they were unlikely to acquire this without extensive supported practice. Given the size of the group, it was not possible to work with each learner in class time. Accordingly, one learner was asked to articulate a personal goal for each in-class task. On completion of the task, the learner was asked to 'think aloud' about the level of performance achieved in relation to his/her stated goal. This modelling was reinforced at the end of each session when learners summarized their reflections in their journals. This made it possible to follow up issues in subsequent sessions with the

whole class, or with individuals through journal responses. Other learners reported discussing issues which arose in our course with their class teachers in their regular interviews.

Figure 1 **Simplified model of the language learning process**



Course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process

A simplified model of the language learning process was introduced in the first session (see Figure 1). Elements identified in the model were: *goals, needs, motivation, input, language knowledge and awareness, (form-focused) practice* (i.e. rehearsal with a goal of enhancing accuracy or fluency), *(meaning-focused) output* (i.e. actual language use with a goal of communication), *feedback* and *reflection*. The model introduced useful concepts and metalanguage for discussing learning problems, as the following incident illustrates. One day a learner commented:

‘I don t like doing activities in class. I prefer grammar exercises.’

By identifying grammar in the language learning model as *language knowledge* it was possible to make the point that learning grammar without producing meaning-focused output (see Swain 1995) would not contribute to the development of proficiency. (While processing input might help, production is essential for syntactic processing to occur.)

Adult language learners deserve such explanations, and benefit from discussing and questioning the process in this way. Constant reference to the model prompted insightful reflections from the learners, and helped support the transfer of responsibility for aspects of the learning process.

Course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks

Both courses incorporated tasks linked to goals identified by the learners. The majority of learners in the Speaking course wished to increase their fluency in everyday spoken English. Accordingly a task linked to the practice element of the model—‘4-3-2’—was introduced to the learners and used in every session. This activity models the principle that, by keeping the subject matter familiar and the language items constant, it is possible to gain fluency in repeated deliveries. Learners were enthusiastic about the ‘4-3-2’ activity (see Arevart and Nation 1991) and volunteered a number of ways of using it outside class. (For example, they suggested using it to practise responses to commonly-asked questions, to rehearse formal presentations, and to review ideas for an assignment.)

Incorporating tasks drawn from learners’ future communication situations resulted in enhanced motivation. Learners’ future needs were addressed by, for example, designing a generic interview task, which sought to meet the speaking goals of course members who wished to enhance their confidence and fluency in responding to questions posed in a range of formal settings. Rather than having to create links between pedagogic tasks and their own needs, learners instead practised tasks associated with their target situations, and received feedback on their performance.

The course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance

In the Reading course, learners identified a number of sources of reading difficulty: lack of knowledge of high frequency vocabulary, inability to match strategies to texts, insufficient time spent reading in English, and poor word and text attack skills. Clearly no 10-hour course could satisfactorily address all these needs. But a course committed to promoting learner autonomy shifts the focus from solving specific problems to providing experience of problem-solving. Accordingly, sessions focused on matching strategies to problems. (See Appendix for an activity of this kind.)

Given the fact that many course members had previous experience of successfully learning another language, they were able to suggest language learning strategies from their own personal repertoires. Other strategies were modelled by the teacher, such as expressions for constructing paraphrases, which were presented and practised in one of the Speaking sessions. Such strategies proved highly popular with the learners and may have resulted in the expansion of their interlanguage by encouraging them to manipulate familiar language items in novel contexts.

The course promotes reflection on learning

Both courses integrated activities which required learners to reflect on their learning, such as discussion of the goal-setting process, analysis of task types, and experimentation with strategies to monitor progress and evaluate personal learning. Awareness-raising occurred both in the discourse surrounding each task ('Why are we doing this? How will it help? What makes it difficult?') and also in the feedback at the end of each session. Learners were asked to complete a journal entry each week recording their answers to questions such as:

- 1 What did you do today?
- 2 What did you learn today?
- 3 What are you going to do differently as a result of today's class?

Learners submitted their journals at the end of each session and had them returned with teacher comments at the start of the subsequent session. Sessions frequently began with activities inspired by issues raised in learner journals, such as brainstorming solutions to problems encountered in authentic communication situations.

Conclusion

What did this experience reveal about the contribution of these course design principles to the design process? Adopting these principles freed the writer from the unrealistic challenge of attempting to meet 20 different learners' needs within a 10-hour course, and instead presented the learners with a means of meeting their own needs. By making the language learning process salient, the course helped learners understand and manage their learning in a way which contributed to their performance in specific language tasks.

More specifically, observations of learners performing course tasks, learners' comments in their journals, and the results of a written evaluation, suggested that the inclusion of tasks related to learners' goals (Principles 1 and 3), resulted in an unprecedented level of motivation. Learners reported that they valued discussion of and practice with solving learning problems, and reported using 'course' strategies outside class. Many also improved their ability to assess their own performance, with one learner reporting excitedly 'I used 4-3-2 to practise my five-minute seminar, and today I spoke for six minutes without stopping!'

Incorporation of material on the language learning process (Principle 2) provided the learners with a model for solving their own learning problems, as the episode with the learner who preferred doing grammar to using the language (cited above) illustrates. The inclusion of material on learner strategies (Principle 4) proved an efficient solution to the problem of limited time. Discussing and applying selected strategies to sample speaking and reading problems served as an excellent modelling device. Learners became familiar with a simple problem-solving process and reported greater confidence in adopting strategies to solve new language problems. One learner wrote in her final evaluation:

- The Reading course was useful in helping me improve my English.
- 1 It helps me to read more quickly.

- 2 Strategies (improved).
- 3 Knowing what to do with problems in reading.

However the *sine qua non* of autonomous learning is represented by Principle 5. Without reflection, learners cannot assess their past learning or plans for future action. Therefore courses designed to promote learner autonomy must encourage learners to set personal goals, monitor and reflect on their performance, and modify their learning behaviour accordingly.

These two courses aimed to provide a supportive environment in which learners were encouraged to take decisions about their language learning. That environment integrated goal-setting activities, discussion of the language learning process, modelling of strategies, task practice, and reflection on experience. The essential characteristic of instructional programmes which foster learner autonomy is the way in which they scaffold instruction to provide guidance without assuming control of learners' decision-making:

In order to improve individual performance, whether it is teaching or learning, we need a sense of ownership, and power, driven by an exploratory attitude and working within a curricular framework that is flexible and dynamic enough to allow for individual explorations. (Cotterall and Crabbe 1999: 141).

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Note

1 I am grateful to Jonathan Newton for permission to use ideas included in this worksheet.

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Appendix
Sample strategy task—speaking course¹

- a Read the list of language learning problems in Table 1.
- b Work with a partner to brainstorm solutions to each problem.
- c Look at the list of solutions presented in Table 2, and discuss each one.
- d Modify the solutions in any way you like, and then try and match them to selected problems.
- e Be prepared to report back to the class.

Table 1

<p>Problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I can't find the right words. I don't know how to make good sentences. I want to use a greater variety of sentences. I don't speak smoothly enough or fast enough. I don't have much confidence to speak. I translate when I speak and listen. I want to use native speaker expressions and not just speak in learner language.
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Table 2

<p>Solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get involved in lots of social activities. Read a range of simple, interesting texts. Study vocabulary lists. Never pay attention to grammar. Do lots of intensive comprehensive activities when you read and listen. Ask your conversation partner(s) for feedback. Only talk with native speakers. Talk often about familiar topics. Talk about texts you have read. Learn appropriate ways to interrupt and to express misunderstanding. Pay attention to the form of language you hear. Spend most of your time studying hard by yourself. Regularly review your progress. When you are having a conversation, check that your conversation partners understands you.
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