# LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THE LOTE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF LEARNER BELIEFS

Jane Kehrwald
University of Southern Queensland

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an investigation into two language learners' beliefs about roles and responsibilities for managing the learning process in a program which has as one of its stated goals the development of lifelong, autonomous learners. The beliefs expressed by the learners indicate that they simultaneously exhibit characteristics consistent with, and in contradiction to, the profile of self-directed, autonomous learners.

## INTRODUCTION

Self-directed, autonomous language learning has been described as the ability to take charge of one's own learning by determining the learning objectives, defining the contents, selecting methods and techniques to be used, and monitoring and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1979). By ability, Holec (1979) means a power or capacity to act, rather than the action itself, without necessarily utilising that ability. The underlying philosophy for the promotion of learner autonomy in language learning is the belief that through the development of the ability of the individual to act more individualistically and pursue personal freedoms, the more capable the individual is to operate in the society in which the individual lives (Benson, 2001).

Few would doubt that self-directed, autonomous language learning can lead to positive outcomes for learners in terms of being more proficient in the target language and providing opportunities for the development of lifelong learning. The changing needs of language learners will require them to go back to learning several times in their lives, and the best way to prepare them for this task is to help them become more autonomous (Scharle and Szabo, 2000). Further, if the underlying philosophies for the promotion of self-directed, autonomous learning are the concepts of respect for the individual in society and the values placed on the pursuit of personal freedoms, age should not be a factor. Self-directed, autonomous learning is not a phenomenon which appears at some predetermined age. It is something which evolves over the lifetime of the individual.

These sentiments are echoed in Queensland's LOTE (Languages Other Than English) program which has, under the heading "Contributions of the key learning area to life-long learning", the explicitly stated goal of the development of self-directed, autonomous learners:

> Learners reflect on their language learning and its role in a culturally diverse society and world. Through reflection on what and how they have learnt, students become strategic learners able to consciously direct and monitor their own learning. They are equipped, therefore for lifelong, independent learning. (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2000, p. 3)

Self-directed, autonomous language learning necessitates a shift in roles and responsibilities for both the LOTE teacher and the LOTE learner. Learners assume the roles and responsibilities traditionally associated with teaching; while teachers, once considered to be the holders and distributors of knowledge, now take on the less traditional roles of facilitators, counsellors, and guides.

For a language program, such as the LOTE program, to fulfill its goal of developing lifelong, self-directed learners, considerable thought needs to be given to how exactly, this can be achieved, lest these goals be reduced to mere rhetoric. Prior to any interventions aimed at facilitating the transfer of responsibility for the management of the learning process from the teacher to the learner, it is essential to access learners' beliefs and attitudes, as these have a profound impact on their learning behaviours (Cotterall, 1995). Erroneous beliefs may lead to less effective approaches to learning; ultimately impacting on learners' success in language learning (Horwitz, 1987).

This paper reports on an investigation into learners' concept of self-directed, autonomous language learning. Specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are LOTE learners' beliefs about their own roles and responsibilities?

2. What are their beliefs about their teachers' roles and responsibilities?

3. In what ways do LOTE learners engage in self-directed, autonomous learning behaviour in the classroom?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In traditional directed learning, the learner's responsibility is, typically, to be the beneficiary of the learning. However, self-directed, autonomous learning necessitates a new role for the learner, a role in which the learner is able to take responsibility for his or her learning. Responsibility relates to learners having the freedom and ability to manage their own affairs and to be in charge of their learning, knowing that there are implications (Scharle and Szabo, 2000). Self-directed, autonomous learners are ones who accept that their own efforts are crucial for effective learning, who are willing to cooperate with their teachers and other learners, who consciously monitor their own progress, and who make an effort to use all available opportunities to engage in the target language and learning activities (Scharle and Szabo, 2000).

Teachers and learners could benefit from some key, guiding principles to facilitate the transfer of responsibility for the management of the language learning process from the teacher to the learner, such as those recommended by Cotterall (2000) and Esch (1996):

1. Choice: Genuine choice is an essential characteristic of any pedagogy aimed at developing self-directed, autonomous learners (Esch, 1996). The choices autonomous learners make in relation to deciding topics, learning activities, and resources will reflect the goals and needs of the learners, as determined by the learners themselves, not those which involve choosing from predetermined categories (Esch, 1996). Choices of learning topics, tasks, and resources will either replicate real-world communicative situations or provide rehearsals for situations in which the learners will participate in the future, as identified in the statement of their learning goals and objectives.

2. Awareness raising: In order to develop the characteristics associated with being a responsible learner, learners must possess a level of awareness of the language learning process – awareness of their own needs, wants, interests and preferred ways of working – in order to identify appropriate goals (Breen and Mann, 1997). They need to be aware of their own attitudes and beliefs toward learning and their responsibilities and roles in the learning process. It is through the development of an individual's awareness that the potential for self-directed, autonomous learning increases (Cotterall, 2000), as learners are then more capable of making strategic use of the learning environment and the resources available in it. A pedagogy promoting self-directed, autonomous learning devotes time to "raising learners' awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives, identifying resources and strategies needed to achieve goals, and measuring progress" (Cotterall, 2000, p.111). To assist in the raising of learners' awareness, the self-directed, autonomous learner needs to develop an understanding of the language learning process.

3. Explicit dialogue: To facilitate the raising of learners' awareness of roles and responsibilities, and of the language learning process, a program which is aimed at promoting learner autonomy in language learning would incorporate explicit discussion and practice in relation to strategies which learners employ to facilitate task performance. Explicit dialogue between teacher and learners, and amongst learners, can also provide a means for learners to share expectations, goals, activities, problems, or difficulties.

4. Flexibility and adaptability: Flexibility relates to whether, once a choice has been made, there must be opportunities for learners to self-repair and to change options as their awareness of their choices and the consequences of their choices grows (Esch, 2000). Adaptability relates to whether it is possible to change learning plans to suit different learners' learning styles or strategies (Esch, 2000).

5. Reflectivity: A program aimed at promoting learner autonomy promotes reflection of the learning experience in order to enhance learning. Learners should be given opportunities to reflect on all aspects of their learning from the goal-setting process to an analysis of tasks and strategy use. Through reflection, learners are able to evaluate the consequences of the learning choices they have made in relation to their motivation, needs, and goals.

6. Shareability: Dialogue, awareness raising and reflectivity are not done in isolation, but shared with teacher and learner in the classroom context. The learning program should provide means for learners to share activities, problems or difficulties with each other and the teacher.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

A collective case-study approach was chosen based on the belief that it would provide a more in-depth examination of learners' beliefs.

## The subjects

The subjects of the study were two Year 11 LOTE (Indonesian) students from a regional, public high school. The subjects, who were approached after their LOTE (Indonesian) teacher expressed an interest in this research project, participated in the study on a volunteer basis. At the beginning of the investigation the two 17 year-old students, one male (Brad), and one female (Jen), were in the final weeks of their Year 11 school year. At the completion of the investigation, the subjects were in the first several weeks of their Year 12 school year.

## Instruments

Three techniques for data collection were utilised in this investigation: an initial structured interview, classroom observations, and a follow up interview. This three-pronged approach to data collection was aimed at ensuring the data would provide more and better evidence from which the researcher could construct meaningful propositions (Mathison, 1988).

The structured interview questions were designed to collect data on biographical details and the language learning backgrounds of the subjects, the subjects' beliefs about roles and responsibilities in the language classroom and their beliefs about their abilities to perform these roles and responsibilities, learners' beliefs about learning a language, and frequency of autonomous learning behaviour in and outside of the classroom. The subjects were given an opportunity to expand on their responses, allowing for their "voices" to come through. The interviews each took 30 minutes and were conducted separately and privately by the researcher.

An observation inventory was developed to record classroom events at the level of episodes and activities in order to systematically describe instructional practices and procedures related to who (the teacher or the learners) assumed responsibility for determining the lessons' objectives, defining the content and the sequencing of this content, selecting methods and techniques to be used, and monitoring and evaluating what had been acquired. The observation inventory was also designed to provide insight into whether or not learner autonomy was being promoted through the development of meta-cognitive skills, such as strategy training, and meta-linguistic skills, such as awareness building.

The subjects were observed in their normal classes three times, over a week-and-a-half period. Each of the classes observed lasted for an hour and twenty minutes. The observation inventory was coded in real time, that is, while the researcher was present in the classroom. Additional notes were taken to allow for detailed descriptions of the teaching and/or incidences so that as complete a picture of the observed lessons as possible was taken.

In order to better understand the phenomenon under investigation, the subjects were interviewed after the observations had taken place. The rationale behind this was the belief that the observation inventory would not allow for an understanding of the motives behind the learning behaviours which occurred in the lesson. Therefore, the interview questions were based on specific incidences which occurred in the lesson. The follow-up interviews with the student subjects were conducted in the week following the observations. School commitments and a fast approaching mid-term break (precipitated by an earlier than usual Easter) necessitated that the two students were interviewed together. Given that the two students enjoyed a positive working relationship, it was considered that they would feel free to speak honestly and openly in each others' company.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using a number of interrelated stages: note-taking, coding, memoing, sorting and, finally, writing (Dick, 2002). After transcription of the interview and observation records, the data were coded according to the beliefs expressed by the respondents and the autonomous learning-teaching behaviours that were observed. Data were presented in a table format that summarised information so that patterns were evident, and to facilitate the presentation of results (Keeves and Snowden, 1987).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents a summary of Jen's and Brad's responses to the interview questions related to who, the teacher or the learner, is responsible for the management of the various aspects of their learning. Table 2 contains extracts from the subjects' extended responses to the questions presented in Table 1, providing greater insight into their beliefs about responsibilities for management of their learning

| Who is responsible for … | Jen's responses | | Brad's responses | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Teacher | Student | Teacher | Student |
| deciding what topics to study in class? | Mainly | Some | Mainly | Some |
| choosing which activities to do? | Mainly | Some | Mainly | Some |
| deciding how long to spend on each activity or task? | Mainly | A Little | Completely | None |
| making the lesson interesting? | Completely | Mainly | Completely | Completely |
| explaining what you are learning? | Completely | A Little | Completely | None |
| explaining how you are learning? | Completely | None | Mainly | Some |
| providing study materials? | Mainly | Some | Completely | A Little |
| correcting your mistakes? | Mainly | Some | Completely | None |
| evaluating how well you have learned the LOTE? | Completely | None | Mainly | A little |
| identifying your weak and strong points in the LOTE? | Completely | Some | Mainly | Some |
| giving you work to do outside of class? | Completely | None | Completely | None |
| motivating you to learn the LOTE? | Mainly | A Little | Mainly | Mainly |

*Table 1.  Summary of learners' beliefs in relation to responsibilities in learning.*

| Extended student responses to questions displayed in Table 1 | Related question |
|---|---|
| Jen: "I think the teacher should have the main say because they are the one teaching the language and they know best." | Deciding topics |
| Jen: "I think there should be student input in what activities to do, because they are able to learn better with different activities, but I think the teacher would be able to see what the class needs to work on." | Choosing activities |
| Brad: "We just really go with the flow.  Yeah, we just really go with the flow.  For that I guess the teacher has got that completely." | Deciding timing or length of activity |
| Brad: "Textbook wise, magazines and Internet sites – that's completely [Angie]. Sometimes she asks us to bring a game along or makes sure we bring an Indonesian dictionary and magazines." | Providing study materials |
| Jen: "I think mostly the teacher because once again, they have done a course in learning about how to teach a language and often people, even once you get to Year 10 you still have people that have done a little language in Grade 7 or in Grade 9 and then thought that they might come back to it and so they don't always have an understanding." | Explaining what and how language is being learned |
| Brad: "I would say, again like the question before the last question, it is [Jen] and [Angie's] role mainly. 'cause, we were doing sentence structure the other day and [Jen] | Correcting mistakes |

| | |
|---|---|
| said 'you've got to do it this way' and [Angie] said 'Yeah, that's right'." | |
| Jen: "Mostly the teacher, but I think the student probably has some understanding of how they are going, but, yeah, mostly the teacher." | Evaluating how well students have learnt the LOTE |
| Brad: "Oh, I guess me and [Angie] both share the same sort of thing – identifying my weak points. But [Angie], having all the gathered information from the lessons and exams and the tests, she'd have a more stronger … So she would be mainly and I would be sometimes, I guess." | Identifying students' weak and strong points |
| Jen: "I think the teacher has a huge part to play if students want to continue with the subject. It can make a really big difference. Also it is up to the students to be willing to want to learn. [Having friends in the class] is easier, because if you can mess about with it then it is not so bad." | Making the lesson interesting |
| Brad: "Well, I think it is all of our responsibilities to motivate. Like, um, doing the LOTE, as I said before, I am driven by interesting facts about different cultures and stuff. There are so many things I didn't know before I entered doing Indonesian. So, the motivation comes from [Angie] and [Jen] as well. They motivate me to do Indonesian and I motivate myself because I want to learn about different cultures." | Motivating students to learn the LOTE |

*Table 2. Extracts from interviews.*

The results of the investigation indicate that the two LOTE learners possess some concept of learner autonomy, as manifested through their beliefs and classroom learning behaviours. They simultaneously exhibited characteristics consistent with and in contradiction to the profile of self-directed, autonomous learners.

As expressed through their beliefs and their learning behaviours in the classroom, the subjects largely deferred to the teacher's judgement and expertise for such responsibilities. In doing so, Jen and Brad appear to conceptualise the role of the teacher as an authority figure; that is, "someone who acts as authority on the target language and on language learning, as well as directing and controlling all learning in the classroom" (Cotterall, 1995, p. 197). Learners who subscribe to the view of the teacher as an authority figure do not fit the profile of autonomous learners, and such a conceptualisation can present an obstacle to the transference of responsibility for managing the learning process from teachers to their learners (Cotterall, 1995). In contrast, self-directed, autonomous learners take on the task of identifying their own learning objectives, in accordance with their subjective criteria and, through the process of use and evaluation, decide which methods, resources, and learning strategies are appropriate to their own learning (Cotterall, 1995).

The collaboration between the teacher and learners in regard to choice of activities and selection of resources and materials of which Jen and Brad spoke in the interviews, was not evidenced in the three observed lessons. Daily learning objectives and activities were determined by the teacher, as were the sequencing and timing of the activities and the creation and use of learning materials, such as worksheets.

It was observed in each of the lessons that the time allocation for each activity, and the transition from one learning activity to another, was managed explicitly by the teacher. This was consistent with Jen's belief that it is the teacher's responsibility to decide how long to spend on each activity, and Jen's lack of confidence in her ability to do so. How tasks were managed within the time allocated by the teacher was up to Jen and her classmates.

However, as evidenced through their classroom learning behaviour, the subjects accepted some level of responsibility for reflecting on and evaluating their learning. Working through the various learning tasks, Jen and Brad, undirected by the teacher, appeared to be able to identify gaps in their understandings of the target language and were able to independently seek assistance in bridging these gaps by strategically employing resources, such as a dictionary, or calling on the teacher or other learners for guidance. Such behaviour is consistent with self-directed learners who will access their

knowledge of the language learning process in order to identify weaknesses in their knowledge, and will draw upon strategies developed from prior experience, trial and error, and from others to compensate (Cotteral, 1995).

The beliefs expressed by Jen and Brad in relation to responsibility for maintaining interest in learning the LOTE, and motivation, and their classroom behaviour, are consistent with self-directed, autonomous learners who accept that success in learning depends as much on individual efforts as it does on the teacher (Scharle and Szabo, 2000). Jen and Brad seemed to enjoy learning the LOTE and seemed to feel comfortable in their current learning environment; enjoying a constructive relationship with the teacher and their fellow students. Jen and Brad also ascribed a great deal of responsibility for motivation to the learners. Their personal motivation for learning the LOTE is derived from an appreciation for learning about new groups of people, their language, and their culture.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of the LOTE curriculum to develop lifelong, self-directed learners necessitates the shift in responsibility for the management of the learning from the teacher to the learner. The results of the investigation suggest that some gap may exist between LOTE curriculum goals and the realities of the language classroom. Relating the findings to the earlier mentioned principles for the development of autonomous learners shows that there was a notable absence of genuine choice. The subjects were not involved in making choices regarding what topics and activities to study and with what resources. Further, they expressed the belief this responsibility rests with the teacher. However, the results did show that some dialogue occurred between the teacher and the subjects and that the subjects possessed some awareness of their motivations and interests in learning the LOTE. Finally, despite their beliefs that the teacher is mainly responsible for feedback and correction, the subjects were able to reflect on and evaluate what they had learned in a collaborative manner. While not intending to diminish the value the LOTE syllabus document, this investigation highlights a common problem faced in a formal teaching context; that is, how syllabus goals are to be operationalized at the classroom level. The results suggest that this issue warrants further investigation lest the LOTE curriculum goals be reduced to mere rhetoric.

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