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TOWARDS AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

'Language not only transmits,
it creates or constitutes knowledge or reality.'
(J. S. Bruner, 1986)

It is the purpose of this paper to examine some aspects of autonomy in language learning with a specific focus on the transition from high school to the first year at university. This transition can be problematic, in that study at a university level requires a degree of independence and initiative which is not generally required in the supportive learning environment of the school system.

Our starting point is identifying those characteristics which make a good language learner (Naiman et al. 1978; Johnson 2001; Maftoon and Seyyedrezaei 2012) and to demonstrate that these characteristics are largely an innate capacity of some and not all learners.

Among these characteristics there is the ability to establish a systematic and autonomous approach to the learning process on the basis of personal inclinations and individual life-skills (Dublin Descriptors 2005). In this sense the good learner is not a passive participant in the process, but, as Schön (1987) claims, acts as a 'problem-solver', able to make decisions and put those decisions into practice. That is to say, learning is 'the creation of knowledge' (Kolb 1984).

Finally, an approach to developing learner autonomy is illustrated, based on the personal experience of the author within the context of a first year ESP course in Communication Studies at the University of Cagliari (Italy). The course makes extensive use of the new technologies through a Moodle platform. It will be demonstrated that a blend of traditional teaching and e-learning can provide a 'bridge' between school and university, allowing the learner to move within a flexible environment and acquire the skills necessary for successful learning.

KEY WORDS: educational processes, language learners, language acquisition, learner autonomy, new technologies.

Introduction

It is the purpose of this paper to address some issues concerning autonomy in language learning. From an educational point of view, while policies in the twentieth century aim at innovation, there is a marked influence of more traditional methods which go back to the founding of the first universities in Europe. Here the approach very much teacher-centred and this can still be seen today in the formal lectures given in many universities. Promoting learner autonomy is an attempt to move away from this position. This move is necessary in the complex, ever changing society found in the western world. Autonomy guides the learner towards the ability to make decisions and work or study independently according his or her inclinations.

In the last twenty or thirty years much work has been done on the innateness of learning and the external experience of the world which goes towards "creating knowledge" (Kolb, 1984). The learner, however, must able to filter that knowledge in order to make sense of his or her learning and various studies on learner autonomy point to its importance in this context.

In the final part of the paper autonomy in language learning is discussed with the role of the teacher as facilitator and the learner as decision maker. This is illustrated with the personal experience of the present author in the use of the New Technologies for teaching English in Higher Education with a particular focus on more innovative ways of promoting autonomy both within and outside the classroom.

The above considerations give rise to four questions central to the study of student autonomy in general educational settings and, more specifically, in language education:

1. To what extent has the historical development of educational thinking influenced current educational policy and practice?
2. From what perspectives can student autonomy be viewed in the learning process?
3. Can approaches to fostering student autonomy be applied in language learning and, if so, what are the roles of the teacher and the learner?
4. In what ways can approaches to student autonomy be applied in the passage from Secondary to Higher Education?

In investigating these questions a 'multi-perspective' approach was employed in order to provide an analysis from different angles: the examination of educational discourse through the analysis of a *c*. one million word corpus, focusing on the impact of language use on educational policy in general; semi-structured interviews with a sample of Italian university students studying English at the *Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo* at the University of Cagliari (Italy); a self-assessment test aimed, firstly, at identifying the average level of language knowledge, from beginner to advanced, in a sample of Italian university students attending the online degree course in Communication Studies (*Scienze della Comunicazione*) at the University of Cagliari (Italy) and, secondly, to provide information about their previous experiences of learning English, both in the Italian educational system and in other contexts (private schools, abroad, professional experience, etc.); and, finally, an analysis of student participation in the above mentioned online degree course with specific reference to the ESP content managed by the present author.

Each data gathering technique is discussed in more detail in the final sections of this paper.

Episodes in education

Historically, educational philosophies have undergone significant changes over the centuries, from ancient Greece, for example with the thinking of Plato in his *Republic* (*c.* 380 B.C.), whereby the individual should be "enamoured of learning" (*trans*. Davies and Vaughan 1997, p. 190), through to the complexities and fragmentation of post-modern society (Hargreaves 1994). This long process has given rise to philosophies which, it must be stressed, are based on a self-referential and dominant culture of Western thinking (Hamilton 1990, p. 2).

These changes have given rise to different perspectives on the educational process and have led to a marked gap between educational thinking and the practical applications of educational policy today in Western society: one might consider the relative disinterest towards the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's ideas on human development in the 1920s and 30s, until recently largely ignored (Wood 1998, p. 10).

In tracking the most important influences on modern thinking from a historical point of view it was decided here to focus first on the institution of the first universities in Europe during the thirteenth century, since they represent the first examples of what might be defined as *formal education* in Western society.

Instruction was based on the *lectio magistralis* or the formal lecture format. Essentially, the lecture is the presentation by an expert or 'master' of contents defined in a syllabus, in this specific case, drawn up and applied by the teacher him/herself, often influenced by religious or political beliefs. It is important here to make a distinction between 'syllabus' and 'curriculum', in order to understand the implications of this example of a fundamentally teacher-centred approach. While a syllabus is an 'index of contents', applied in specific disciplines and in this case imposed by the 'master', the curriculum covers general education policy defined by a national government body, for instance, in the United Kingdom *Department for Education*, or this may also include other institutions like the *Council of Europe* in the European Union, to be discussed later in reference to general educational policy in Europe.

The application of a rigid teacher-directed syllabus means that the lecture format automatically relegates the learner to being a passive participant in the lesson and places the teacher in a position of absolute authority.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Enlightenment gives rise to a certain change in perspective. This can be exemplified by the reflections of John Locke in his treatise *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690):

> Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, *white paper void of all characters*, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*. (The italics are mine)

Locke sees the learner as an 'empty vessel' and asks the question as to how such an empty vessel can acquire knowledge. His answer is through 'experience', that is to say the

learner's reaction to an outside world and not simply a passive input. Indeed, from this period students were increasingly allowed to ask questions or ask for clarification from the 'master', thereby satisfying their individual curiosities and doubts.

This idea is taken further by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his treatise on education *Emile* (1762). He argues that learners have innate faculties and education concerns the "inner development" of these faculties, again, through experience in an *informal* environment giving space to the individual growth of the learner, discovering the rapport between body and mind through the exploration of the senses, feelings and sensations (Zedda 2003, p. 59).

With the gradual standardisation of schooling from the nineteenth century onwards new approaches to education are introduced as more interest is focused on pedagogical issues, in particular, the question of 'how learners learn'.

It is certainly true that the general approach remained conventional or teacher-centred, as illustrated by the social interests and cutting humour of Charles Dickens in the novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838):

> EDUCATION – At Mr Wackford Squeers's Academy, Dotheboys Hall, at the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, Youth are boarded, clothed, booked, furnished with pocket money, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry, the use of the globes, algebra, single stick (if required), writing arithmetic, fortification, and every other branch of classical literature. Terms twenty guinea per annum. No extras, no vacations, and diet unparalleled.

The syllabus is rich, if a little unorthodox, but we immediately sense a vein of authority, to be revealed as the narrative unfolds, with the use of corporal punishment, little freedom for the pupils and, perhaps most important, little idea of practical teaching skills.

The principle that each individual should be manipulated and consequently 'moulded' according to a single model, dictated by the rules of society, politics and religion, still holds true today, if national curricula are carefully analysed. Take, for example, the numerous education reforms swinging from one position to another over the last decades in the United Kingdom (Trowler 2003).

Nevertheless, changes were taking place in the 1800s. For the purposes of this paper we focus our attention on two specific examples, which are significant with regard to the question of developing learner autonomy.

Firstly, there is the work of Friedrich Fröbel *The Education of Man* (1826) concerning the education of young children in the context of the *kindergarten*, or a learning environment in which activities may be defined as "recreational" (De Vivo 1994, p. 163). The approach has influenced education policy through to modern times, in particular with regard to pre-school and primary education. For example, studies carried out in the 1980s in the United States concluded that (Patton *et al.* 1994, p. 115):

> […] teachers proceeded with a general developmental programme that included considerable free time, time in small group activities, as well as circle time when all the children gathered together with the teachers to listen to stories, sing songs, and discuss events of interest.

Thus, education here is seen as developmental, where the focus is on the growth of the individual, creativity and cooperation with others.

This also brings us to the approach employed by Joseph Lancaster at the beginning of the 1800s. This approach was based on cooperation and giving responsibility to older pupils in passing on their acquired knowledge to younger pupils in very large classes. While his disciplinarian methods came in for criticism, we can find parallels in the idea of 'peer-teaching' today, in which students take responsibility for sharing their learning with significantly positive results, as illustrated in the experiments carried out by Assinder (1991, cited in Benson 2001, p. 154) with language students in Australia. The results showed:

> […] gains in motivation, participation, 'real' communication, in-depth understanding, responsibility for learning, commitment to the course, confidence, mutual respect […].

All of these aspects concern both the inner development of the individual and improved social skills. In particular the learner develops a heightened self-awareness and practical reflective life-skills.

This takes us now into the twentieth century, where thinking begins to centre on the whole individual from a perspective of social participation and of cognitive development. By the 1930s ideas were moving towards what might be defined as the "democratisation" of the educational process (to use the terms of the Brazilian educationalist Paolo Freire in the 1970s) and here the work of John Dewey is particularly important. A clear distinction is made between *conventional* and *innovative* approaches to educational practices (Dewey 1938, cited in Kolb 1984, p. 5):

> To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill is opposed acquisition of them by means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world […].

These reflections are far ahead of their times, since they lay the basis for modern thinking on the roles of the learner and the teacher. This is illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: **Convention vs Innovation**

Convention	**Innovation**
Education is viewed as a pre-established route which is inflexible and which has fixed long-term goals, e.g. final evaluation at the end of a course. Boundaries are drawn between formal education and the professional world or what happens after formal schooling has reached its conclusion.	The education process is viewed as more complex, in particular considering rapid changes in modern society. This dictates a flexible approach following different paths and establishing short-term, attainable objectives (King 1991), e.g. continuous assessment, in an ongoing, lifelong process (Eraut 1994).

One of the implications of this development is that the roles of teacher and learner gradually undergo a radical change throughout the century.

Up to this point we have focused our main attention on the learner. Now we briefly turn our attention to the teacher. For the analysis of teacher roles in education a corpus-based study of 100 academic papers from the online *British Education Index* (BEI) online and 500 articles from the online *Education Guardian*, was carried out (Wade 2017). The corpus was analysed through the KWIK (Key Word In Context) concordancer, allowing the examination of individual lexical item frequency and common collocations (cf. Hunston 2002; Meyer 2002). The results highlight a hierarchy of terms which are frequently used today in reference to teachers and the multiple roles they are required to cover in what we may define as 'post-modern society', outlined by Hargreaves (op. cit., p. 56):

> In postmodern society, the growth of economic diversity together with the revitalisation of local and regional identities is having profound implications for knowledge and belief systems and the expertise that rests upon them. In society as a whole, we are experiencing a shift from a small number of stable singularities of knowledge and belief to a fluctuating, ever changing plurality of belief systems.

This multiplicity represents diverse levels of educator expertise which extend from mere 'provider of knowledge' to an understanding of psychological and sociological issues in the educational process. The salient teacher roles identified the present author's corpus study were as follows (from high to low frequency): 'support', 'mentor', 'tutor', 'coordinator', 'guide', 'counsellor', 'facilitator', 'mediator', 'moderator', 'friend', 'peer', 'buddy'.

Further, in one particular study (Cortazzi *et al.* 1999, p. 168) of how Chinese students define a 'good teacher' in their own language, a survey was carried out with 113 students of which there were 95 respondents. The predominant definition was that of 'friend' (42/95). This is an interesting cross-cultural form of compatibility, taking us outside Western thinking and, perhaps leading us to reflect on data sources from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Rather than an absolute source of knowledge, the teacher is now considered to have the role of supporting learners in exploring the world around them and, thus, acquiring knowledge through a 'journey of discovery'. It is interesting to hear the voices of learners when reflecting on how the teacher interacts with them. Here are the considerations of a Secondary School pupil in a case study carried out by Younger *et al.* (1999, p. 239):

> He tries to give the class a good go, and we get on really well with him. He knows his stuff. He knows your weaknesses and your strengths, and he'll sit down and talk to you the whole lesson to explain something. He'll go round and you learn more then. He's a very good teacher.

Note how this teacher is particularly sensitive to the needs of his pupils. This is reflected in the perspective of Freire (1970, cited in Shor 1993, p. 29) who observes that if a teacher gives space to his or her students, it is considered, from a conventional point of view, to be ineffective as a strategy, since the teacher is not imposing the necessary

professional authority expected in educating the learner. Instead the teacher is open to dialogue and negotiation which, according to traditionalists, undermines that very authority. Indeed, Freire (1974, p. 36) argues that guidance towards reflection on the world which surrounds us allows an active role for the learner, leading to the development of their critical consciousness or 'inner growth' (cf. Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1762, above).

In practical terms today, while lip service is paid to innovation, there is still a tendency towards traditional approaches to teaching. Here we might define this as the *convention-innovation dichotomy* which moves along a continuum where the approach may be more or less 'convention' or 'innovation' depending on the specific context of the approach employed. We may take as a possible example two extremes on the continuum. Firstly, the traditional university level lecture. In the author's personal experience this format still predominant in Italy in Higher Education and not only. Balboni (2002, p. 243) observes that in the Italian school system learners need to be 'taught', while teachers 'know' how and why. Therefore, learners are, once again, passive participants in the educational process. Secondly, the kindergarten *learning-through-action* approach, where learners are actively involved. It is Balboni (*ibid*., p. 243) who traces the school system in Italy along this continuum, illustrated in Figure 1 below:

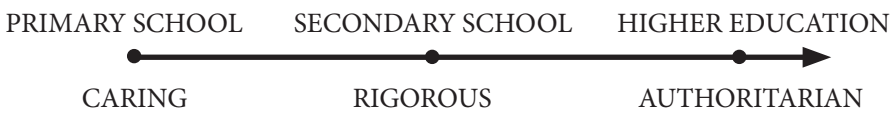

Figure 1: **The educational continuum in the Italian school system**

A result of this *dichotomy* concerns, in particular, the setting of innovative objectives in the curriculum and the frequent application, on the contrary, of traditional practices in the classroom. Practices which fail to satisfy the needs of learners and, consequently, the attainment of concrete goals in terms of real-life skills and knowledge. Specifically, this problem arises when the curriculum defines a destination, but fails to establish how to get there and does not give space to the individual inclinations and talents of the learner. This last point could be exemplified by the theories of Gardner (1983) concerning 'multiple intelligences', identified in seven domains which represent the different psychological characteristics of individual learners and, consequently different *mind-sets* which will influence the learner's management and processing of new input. Wood (*op. cit*, p. 288) points out, however, that in Western culture the focus is on the logico-mathematical domain, to the exclusion of, for example, the kinaesthetic or 'physical awareness' domain (*ibid*., p. 281) which is to be found in other cultures, illustrating, perhaps, one of the limitations of educational policies in Western society.

This lack of guidance along the path to 'enlightenment' tends to be something similar to a journey into unknown territory without a map to guide us on the way. Wade (2013), for instance, examines the metaphorical concept of 'education as a journey' and how this

may influence our thinking in pedagogical practices. Journeys are not simply a starting point and a destination. For instance, Harding *et al*. (1980, p. 8) make an analogy between climbing a mountain and the objectives established in formal educational settings where: "A major problem is that one cannot admire the view until one has reached the top". The data collected by Wade (*ibid*.) show that the educational process is a complex and, at times, unpredictable pathway in which decisions need to be made on the part of the learner and, not necessarily, by the educational provider. For instance, the learner can find him/herself at 'a professional crossroads' or 'on a rough highway', can choose 'alternative routes', can 'take a wrong turn on the road', can 'stay on track', can follow 'multiple pathways', a learning experience can 'offer other paths' and so on. This has its consequences in analysing general guidelines in educational policy, for example in the European Union where the focus directed towards the concept firstly, of *lifelong learning* viewed, theoretically at least, as a flow of experience or, more precisely *experiences*, throughout one's life and, secondly, the acquisition of knowledge which can be exploited in the real world, i.e. the creation of a knowledge-based society. Some of these principles are outlined in the *European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning* (2008), briefly summarised below In Table 3:

Table 3: **European educational policy**

LIFELONG LEARNING	KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY
• Includes initial education, continuing professional development, and post-retirement opportunities for cultural enrichment. • Supporting all learners with the potential to benefit both themselves and society through participating in higher education. • Europe's universities need to develop their specific role as lifelong learning institutions "forming a central pillar of the *Europe of Knowledge*"	• Raise the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society. • Aim to maximise the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. • Create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education. • Allow Europe to compete in a rapidly changing world.

What we note about these objectives is that they cover a vast area ranging from formal schooling, to the growth of the individual as an active member of society, to more flexibility, necessary in the complex and ever-changing world of today. In many ways the education of European citizens has become "fragmented" and "unstable" (Cambi 2000, p. 161), rather than representing a 'smooth flow of experience'. To use the words of John Stewart Mill in his 1859 treatise *On Liberty* (cited in Carr 1995, p. 109): "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree which requires to grow and develop on all sides".

It is for this reason that perspectives on education need to change radically, moving towards more learner autonomy and decision-making abilities, often suffocated in 'conventional' educational settings. In short, more attention needs to be focused on

the *empowerment* of the individual by enhancing and developing his or her personal inclinations and skills.

In the last twenty or thirty years there have been significant theoretical developments in this direction. For example, in the work of Kolb (*op. cit*., p. 52) it is argued that contact with the outer world, in other words 'experience' (*cf*. John Locke 1690, above), is essential to forming to our individual identity:

> Learning, the creation of knowledge, occurs through the active extension and grounding of ideas and experiences in the external world and through internal reflection about the attributes of these experiences and ideas.

In his model for *experiential learning*, Kolb (1993) brings together many of the aspects described above. There is a constant interplay between what is innate or unique to the individual and to external influences. Learning is not merely an outcome, but an ongoing process fed by experience of reality. This experience provides a source of knowledge, or multiple knowledges, springing from different belief systems, which may not be compatible with our own world view. The learning process entails the ability to internalise and conciliate these new knowledges with those we already possess. Therefore, we are not simply assimilating knowledge, but recreating it by making it our own (Hutton 1989, p. 51). Once again, to use the words of Kolb (*op. cit*., p. 1), human beings act not only as passive observers but "proactive" participants in "creating and shaping" their reality. This process consequently leads the learner towards independence of action (Holec 1981, cited in Pemberton *et al*. 1996, p. 3), freed from complete dependency on mentors or 'holders of knowledge'. Such a learning process may be viewed as providing a pathway to autonomy.

The question of whether it is possible to teach autonomy or not has given rise to much debate in the last decades. Perhaps, instead of 'teach', it would be more appropriate to use the term "encourage" (Kenny 1993, p. 440) a learning process by giving space to learners rather than implementing a pathway imposed by rigid and inflexible curricula. Boud (1989, p. 44) identifies one of the dangers of an approach which gives more freedom to learners, in that it may have the opposite effect in which lack of guidance leads to an increased insecurity and, consequently, dependency on teachers (Esch 1997, p. 165), because the learner does not have the self-confidence to make decisions about what action to take in order to acquire the knowledge necessary for his or her 'inner growth'. This is one of the contradictions in theory regarding learner autonomy. Perhaps the idea of Horwitz (1989, p. 86) comes close to a rational explanation in which learners possess "predisposition or experience", which, of course, will vary from one learner to another. Therefore, some learners will be able to deal with decision-making more than others.

According to Cotteral (1995a, p. 224), the process of attaining autonomy is through "frank discussion of objectives, methodology, roles and expectations". This means that one of the prerequisites for success lies in a clear teacher-learner interface, where learners are not only concerned with reaching objectives, but also negotiating the conditions necessary to get there.

The fact remains that the learner needs to make decisions about his or her learning. Schön (1987, p. 28) refers to how our actions may undergo modification on the basis of reflections which create a kind of "perspective or *frame*, a way of looking at things" (Schön 1979, cited in Block 1999, p. 135. The italics are mine) in seeking strategies for implementing a plan of action. This idea is extended by Zimmerman (1998, p. 1), who suggests a process which serves to "enable students to become controllers rather than victims of their own learning". In Zimmerman's model (*ibid*., p. 5) there are three phases in a *learning cycle* which entails:

1. "forethought" or the ability to plan,
2. "volitional control" or the ability to make decisions and take action on those decisions and finally
3. "self-reflection" or the analysis of the outcome of that action which feeds into the reactivation of the cycle.

It is now that we turn specifically to the idea of autonomy in language learning. Is such an approach compatible with acquiring a second or foreign language? Language proficiency is one of the central themes in European Union educational policy, and aims at assuring that all European citizens have a *working* knowledge of at least two EU languages (Balboni, *op. cit*., p. 158). We shall attempt to address this question in the next section of the present paper.

Autonomy in language learning

Is learning a language different from other disciplines? There is much debate about this question. If we take Bruner's (1986) view that in itself language creates reality, there may be reason to accept the idea that this difference exists, since, from this perspective language enriches the individual's way of thinking or looking at the world. On the other hand, some would argue that learning a language is different, but that if the teaching approach focuses on grammar and rules or commonplaces which are culturally biased, it may be difficult for the learner to break out of these constraints. This is a question of awareness or critical assessment, which is one of the foundations of acquiring autonomy (*cf.* Esch, *op. cit*., p. 166).

From the 1970s, much work was done on identifying an underlying universal sequence in language learning (*cf*. Selinker 1972; Dulay *et al*. 1974; Krashen *et al*. 1983; Ellis 1986). While it appears that certain patterns do appear, little attention is paid to other factors which may influence the learning process. For language teachers it is often frustrating when the students in a class all seem to learn differently. In part this may be due to the fact that they are required to follow a rigid syllabus with clearly established time-scales, for example in secondary school, where a syllabus is applied from year to year, without taking into consideration the different needs or 'learning styles' of individual students (Littlejohn 1985, p. 255) and assuming that all learners will, or are able to reach the same objectives. Effectively, in formal schooling the teaching approach and the syllabus are tailored towards the universal learner, assuming that it will satisfy the needs of the majority.

This fails to take into account four different factors which work together in the learning process beyond top-down universal input: affective, cognitive, metacognitive and sociocultural aspects of learning (Griffiths *et al*. 2001, pp. 250–251). If these factors are not taken into consideration, as Tadeu de Silva *et al*. (1993, p. 43) claim, formal language content in the syllabus is reduced "to a mausoleum of dead facts". This can lead towards a negative attitude with regard to the language being studied. In an unpublished survey carried out by the present author in 2002, in which English language students at the *Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo* of the University of Cagliari in Italy were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format (McDonough *et al*. 1997, pp. 186–188). In contrast to the traditional questionnaire, this qualitative approach to data collection allows a more detailed exploration of the interviewee's reflections on, in this case, learning English. The restricted sample for this survey concerned eight volunteers with an intermediate B1 (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*) knowledge of the language. Each interview was carried out in Italian, recorded and transcripts were made in order to avoid the distraction of note-taking during the conversation (Cohen *et al*. 2000, p. 188). They were then freely translated into English, subsequently codified with the initials of the interviewee, their language proficiency level, the sequential number of the interview and page number of the transcript. For the purposes of this paper the reflections of one of the respondents concerning his eight years of learning English in the Italian school system were particularly enlightening:

> … the level of satisfaction was very limited, in the sense that I didn't like English and I couldn't understand it. I don't know if this was my fault or the fault of the teachers. That I don't know. (MM. Pre-INT I. TALK 2/9)

This patently concerns two specific *affective factors* in the respondent's learning experience. Firstly, his *dislike* of the language and, secondly a sense of *insecurity*. Both of these factors can be attributed to his previous learning experience and, more importantly, affected subsequent motivation and choices in learning the language. Psychologically there is an emotive side to learning a language (Hutchinson *et al*. 1987, pp. 46247), where the elements of self-confidence or self-esteem come into play and these elements may have a direct influence on learning outcomes. Breen *et al*. (1997, p. 134) sustain that a "robust sense of self" gives the learner a sense of independence, even to the extent of questioning the efficacy of processes taking place in the specific educational setting and allowing an increased capacity for decision-making in delineating his or her learning pathway.

The *cognitive factor* regards how the learner processes language input or direct exposure to the target language. Ellis (*op. cit*., p. 114) sees cognitive processes as "the manner in which people perceive, conceptualise, organise and recall information", which Benson (*op. cit*., p. 87) claims is one of "the fundamental psychological processes involved in autonomous learning". This aspect of the process comprises an internal and not necessarily externalisable knowledge of how we process language input and not only. The language input is closely intertwined with our *experience* through life, contributing

to our overall intellectual growth. It is important to stress here that in postmodern society there is an overload of input which must be rationalised by the language learner who risks being overwhelmed by such an influx of information. In the case of foreign or second languages: lexis, syntax, discourse, content, purpose of communication, register, social factors and so on, remembering that the processing of all of these factors takes place simultaneously.

This phase of internal processing is closely linked to language awareness *metacognitive factors* applied in practical terms in making decisions and using acquired knowledge in order to formulate strategies in dealing with specific language learning problems. As a consequence, learners acquire more control over their learning and, as Wenden (1995, p. 192) claims, such an awareness will affect attitudes towards taking on the responsibility for his or her learning autonomously. In the specific context of learning, individuals are capable of making decisions in initiating actions or tasks. What is more, they need to be aware of why they need to carry out a learning task, what type of task it is, and define the procedure for carrying out that task. This process can be broken down into four phases (cf. Kenny, *op. cit.*): the learner needs to be able to initiate the process and he or she should have the capacity to make a plan of action and justify decisions taken; the learner should develop a critical sense of his or her own actions and those of others; be able to communicate effectively; should be able to interact with others, both in requesting help if necessary and co-operating with others. The ability to view a problem critically from a personal point of view implies the ability to employ "self-monitoring behaviour" (Cotteral 1995b, p. 99). Although objections have been raised as to the subjectivity of self-assessment procedures, evidence put forward by Bachman and Palmer (1989) in their comparison of learner self-rating and traditional, externally motivated assessment of learner proficiency would seem to point to a minimal disparity between the two. This view is further supported by Oscarson (1989), who identifies a number of direct benefits of the capacity to self-assess: it is a motivational factor, in that the learner builds a sense of self-confidence, since judgements on his or her performance are not only based on external evaluation; the learners becomes more aware of learning as process rather than a product; he or she is constrained to think about how and why a process is carried out, rather than only taking into consideration the end result, as we find in traditional testing; this allows the learner to set realistic objectives (Wade 2002, p. 275), not only in formal learning, especially at university level, and provide a basis for further independent language study at the end of an educational cycle.

Language learning also implies interaction with others: individuals, groups, educational setting, specific geographical location and so on. In this case *sociocultural factors* come into play, maintaining social relations and being aware of cultural diversity. The latter is important in language learning, since a language is not only an abstract phenomenon, but an expression of one's identity. This identity may, however, come into conflict with the new identity acquired in learning a second or foreign language, which, as a consequence, can lead to a kind of short-circuit impeding learning at a deeper level. Social interaction and social integration (Norton 2000) represent an important part of

immersing one's self in the target language. Cortazzi *et al*. (1996, p. 114) define the ability to break down these barriers as "cultural synergy" or a bridge between differing cultural perspectives. This is desirable, where there is:

> […] the need for mutual understanding of different cultures, communication styles and academic cultures. This does not mean that diversity and variety will be merged into one, but that natural divisions exist and academic cultural practitioners should have an open mind to be aware of the operation of other styles and appreciate their emphasis. Cultural synergy here implies that there is an additional benefit from collaboration which is greater than the single benefit for each side in the intercultural context.

This is important, for example, in the case of ERASMUS students, who need to become integrated in the target culture, not only linguistically but also sociologically (identity, behaviour, understanding social diversity and different ways of thinking), if they are to expect concrete results from their experience and not find themselves psychologically isolated as outside observers. As Little (2000, p. 16) claims: "individual cognition is embedded in processes of social interaction".

While we might reflect on these general characteristics of autonomy in language learning it is also necessary, as mentioned previously, to consider the fact that different learners learn differently and that, consequently, some learners are more successful than others. Numerous studies have been carried out in order to define those characteristics which make a 'good language learner'. In the 1970s Naiman *et al*. (1978/1996, pp. 58–59) carried out a significant study aimed at answering this question, both with adults from different backgrounds and with students in formal schooling. In general terms five strategies are identified in the good language learner:

1. active involvement in learning the target language and the ability to consciously choose activities suiting their personal interests;
2. awareness of the fact that language is a system; the active use of language is an essential factor in developing interactive social skills;
3. the importance of overcoming such affective aspects of language learning as self-esteem;
4. the ability to monitor progress and hypothesise solutions to specific language problems.

Instead, learners who were less successful had had little exposure to the target language; had studied the language in settings inadequate for the circumstances; were not highly motivated; were negatively influenced by affective factors *(ibid*. p. 57).

In addition, we need to consider the importance of learning strategies or making decisions about what to do in order to learn a language. Oxford (1990, p. 8, cited in Johnson 2001, p. 153) defines learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations". Note how these characteristics reflect many aspects of autonomous language learning discussed previously, as do some of the conclusions in Maftoon *et al*.'s (2012, p. 1601) study, where not only language proficiency, but also cognitive and metacognitive knowledge contribute to making a good learner.

We now turn to some ways in which the theoretical considerations discussed above might be applied in practice.

Practical applications

Firstly, we shall start with some brief considerations concerning to kinds of tasks which can be employed in fostering student autonomy in language learning. In general terms, Henry (1989, p. 30) suggests "problem solving and project-based methods". Learners are given responsibility for setting up a project and the target language is used as "the vehicle through which the learners handle the content and discuss their experiences" (Kenny, *op. cit.*). Crabbe (1993, pp. 444–445) places great importance on the passage from what he terms the "public domain of learning", or the processes initiated by the teacher, typically in a formal learning environment, to the "private domain of learning" which is characterised by processes initiated by the learner, either inside or outside the classroom context.

Another factor to be considered is the organisational skills of the learner. Wenden (*op. cit.*, p. 185), suggests a three-stage procedure: *reflection* or linking the task to previous experience; *motivation* or identifying a practical reason for carrying out the task; *procedure* or decisions about how the task is to be carried out. This approach does, however, present some problems. In particular, in their research into successful learners and learning tasks, Rubin *et al.* (2008, p. 303) observe that:

> Learners had difficulty in distinguishing between a goal (that is, what you want to learn) and a purpose (that is, why you want to learn it).

This is similar to the problem we find in formal instruction discussed previously. Excessive attention is paid to the result and not how to reach it.

In order to illustrate some possible approaches to fostering learner autonomy, we now focus on the present author's experience of teaching English as a Foreign Language at the University of Cagliari. The English course is in the first year of the degree in Communication Studies (*Scienze della Comunicazione*). This means that the majority of students come directly from High School and should have an upper-intermediate knowledge of the language, corresponding to indications for level B2 outlined in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* drawn up by the Council of Europe. These are the objectives set by the Italian Education Ministry (MIUR), along with indications provided by the *Dublin Descriptors* (2005) and which lay the foundations of the English course. The *Dublin Descriptors* are particularly important, since they provide a basis for the development of life-skills beyond formal education: knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgements; communication skills; learning skills. We note here how these indications tie in very closely with the basic principles of autonomous learning outlined in this paper.

Before beginning the course, students are asked to assess their own learning experience (See Bachman *et al.* above), i.e. level of knowledge and number of years study. The results are generally somewhat disappointing, as illustrated in the following data for

2015–2016: of 42 respondents, 7 regarded themselves as beginners, 20 as elementary and 15 as intermediate. This is in spite of the fact that 74% of the respondents had 8 years of formal language training at school. These results are by-and-large confirmed by the teacher's own assessment once the course was underway.

Again, as we have seen previously, this illustrates the disparity between institutionally established goals and objective results. This disparity does not only concern formal instruction in Italy, as we can surmise from Naiman *et al.*'s (*op. cit*., p. 17) findings in Canada:

> Several interviewees who had won high marks in school language courses attached little significance to them in retrospect, since they spoke the language badly or not at all.

A further problem is the gap between the school environment and Higher Education. The school environment tends to be more supportive providing close and regular contact with teachers. In Higher Education, students are required to organise their own studies according to the syllabi established and set texts adopted by the teachers, who meet their students, above all, in formal lectures. This is particularly important for first year students who need to pick up organisational skills and acquire the ability to make decisions about their learning autonomously in a very short time.

The course itself is *blended*, that is to say in part taught traditionally with lectures (20 hours) and in part online (40 hours). These two elements are integrated by making use of a MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) open source learning platform, allowing a multimedia approach to teaching. Above all the multimedia tools used in the English course are forums and video.

The first part of the course in the first semester focuses on remedial and consolidation work, and concerns largely work with grammar. The material is created in-house by the teacher and we are thus able to tailor it to our students' specific needs. This is possible, because the forum allows an exchange of information between teacher and student and between student and student. Communications arrive automatically via email to all participants in the course and are posted in the forum. The system is flexible, since, while the teacher initiates activities (worksheets, exercises, videos), it is the students who do the work and post it in the forum for general consultation. In this case the teacher acts as a *catalyst* with aim of motivating students to participate actively in the course.

The advantage of this approach is that the teacher can monitor students' work constantly in a form of *continuous assessment*, giving space for suggestions and fine-tuning of the course and teaching materials used.

In the second semester the 20 hours of lectures are held and students are required to carry out a research project.

The lectures deal with various aspects of communication, including the peculiarities of the English language, media language, TV, advertising, cinema, analysis of poetic/musical texts and the language of cartoons and comics, all topics studied on the other courses in the first year. In this way students can see the relevance of course content, which is an important factor in motivating interest in the course. The lessons are videoed

in streaming and then posted on the English page along with PDF copies of the lesson slides. At the conclusion of each lesson a chat is opened for those who have followed it in distance mode, so that it is possible to ask questions and open a debate about the theme of the lesson. This approach allows for greater flexibility, as participants can organize their studies in their own time, which is particularly important for working students. The lessons are also backed up by specific material posted in the forum (exercises and reading comprehension texts) both before and after each lesson, in order to consolidate each topic covered.

The research project is aimed at encouraging groupwork and acquiring organizational and research skills useful for study at university and beyond. The teacher provides a general outline for carrying out and publishing research: introduction, methodology, data analysis, analysis of language content, conclusion. Each group is composed of five members who assign different responsibilities to themselves with a group leader who coordinates the research project. Students are free to choose topics based on the lessons described above. Once the work has been completed it is 'published' in a specific forum and is open to comment by peers. This work is then presented in the oral test at the end of the course.

There are no set texts, but texts are suggested and reviewed on the platform for those students who prefer to take a more traditional approach to learning. These include grammar manuals and reading texts concerning different aspects of communication theory.

Finally, links are provided for two English courses online: *BBC Learning English* and *British Council Learn English*. Again, this is a free choice for students.

Conclusion

A reflection on this approach is necessary, in that it is at its primary stages and more work has to be done. It is the author's opinion that MOODLE is used only in a small part of its potential, and requires more experimentation. Firstly, on the part of the teacher in exploring new methodological approaches within this context, and, secondly, a closer co-operation with the technical staff in our department.

To sum up the results of this experience, there are some aspects of the management of the course which may be useful in improving in putting theories of learner autonomy into practice, with specific reference to language learning. While exam results were satisfying for 2016–2017, a number of problems with this approach have been encountered:

1. Students are at times disoriented by free choices in what materials to use and how to use them.
2. Rather than working constantly throughout the year participants tended to leave their study of the materials available on the learning platform until the final phase of the course.
3. Some students felt embarrassed about publishing their work in the forums and this lack of confidence is certainly something that should be overcome, in particular,

when they make the move into the professional world. This is something we shall to work on in the future.

4. Some students considered e-learning to be impersonal and preferred lectures and using traditional texts. This is a personal preference which should be respected if we consider personal learning styles.
5. Informal interviews at the end of the course revealed that there was general agreement concerning the fact that not enough space was given to 'conversation practice', something which most students find particularly important.

Overall, we conclude that it is fundamentally important to put theory into concrete practice and constantly seek new approaches and solutions to problems, which are often the result of applying conventional techniques while setting goals which in formal curricula are, theoretically, reached by more innovative methods. In short, it is problematic to apply innovation in a conventional educational setting.

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TOWARDS AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Summary

Through history educational processes have swung from 'conventional' approaches to those which we define as 'innovative'. By conventional approaches we intend formal education as heavily teacher-centred, while innovation places the learner at the centre of the learning experience. Here a distinction must be made between regarding the learner as a "blank page" (John Locke 1690) where the learner is a passive observer and the learner as 'processor of input' leading to a process of "inner growth" (Jean Jacques Rousseau 1762), and therefore an active participant in learning.

While in the 1800s new ideas began to develop, it is in the twentieth century that innovative approaches begin to influence educational thinking on a wider scale. Education increasingly becomes a *democratic process* in which an attempt is made to substitute 'authority' with 'individuality'. Postmodern society (Hargreaves 1994) is particularly complex and individual inclinations have become necessary in creating multiple pathways within a context of lifelong learning, rather than the imposition of pre-packaged, inflexible curricula.

Learner autonomy fits into this picture, in the sense that it gives the learner an opportunity to make decisions about what to learn and how to learn it. While much research has been carried out into autonomous learning processes, it is only relatively recently that these theories have been experimented in language learning, which differs somewhat from a more general approach to autonomy in other contexts. According to Naiman *et al.* (1978), for example, a good language learner will have good social skills, analytical skills, organizational abilities and strong sense of motivation.

In practical terms, the author has experimented the use of the New Technologies through a MOODLE platform with the aim of fostering autonomy in the teaching of English at a university level. Through the use of forums, video lessons in streaming and multimedia tools, an attempt is made to bridge the gap between High School and university. The problems encountered in this project regard the students' difficulties in dealing with autonomy or freedom of choice, as they often feel disoriented since they are used to a more authoritative approach to learning guidance.

KEY WORDS: educational processes, language learners, language acquisition, learner autonomy, new technologies.

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