

Learner autonomy stories

Here, teachers share their learner autonomy stories of their personal and professional growth and journey of change though engaging with issues of autonomy in language education. Yes, please do send in your story for the next issue of *Independence*.

Trusted to be able to take decisions from early on

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It was only last year that I first talked to Leni and Lienhard at a conference on foreign language learning methodology in Leipzig, Germany and it was at the very same event that, together with Christian (see his writing in this issue too), we all planned to prepare a conference on autonomy at our university in Essen, Germany. This might seem like a real jumpstart into the field of autonomous language learning—my personal autonomy story began a lot earlier, however, which is why I was thrilled rather than scared by this opportunity.

Influenced by Bernd Rüschoff's and others' work on the use of technology in language lessons and the related idea that technology can help enable learners to work autonomously, I set out to do my own PhD research in 2001. It was just after the ministry in our part of Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia, had announced the state-wide integration of English lessons into years 3 and 4 of primary school that I got interested in doing research in this field. At that time I was already visiting some primary schools which had started to integrate the subject on a voluntary basis. I was lucky enough to get in contact with teachers who were part of the team developing the future curriculum. I observed lessons in order to find out about the methodology used in class and in order to see how much responsibility for any decisions



taken in the language classroom the students were granted.

During my PhD studies I dealt more with the concept of openness than with the idea of autonomy. This is because the discussions in German primary school didactics circle around the term openness, which is related to the design of learning scenarios that are least restrictive as possible. These concepts of openness and autonomy do approach a similar issue from different sides though—openness from the institutional side, i.e. the side of the learning environment, and autonomy from the angle of the individual's capacity (Holec 1981) that he/she should ideally, with the teacher's help, be able to develop in such an open learning environment. There have also been attempts to define aspects and degrees of openness. Peschel (2003) distinguishes organizational, methodological, content-related, social and personal openness, with organizational openness merely being the opportunity for students to work independently on tasks set by the teacher and the ultimate goal being fulfilled when a democratic community, in which joint and informed decisions are taken by everyone together, exists. Many learning scenarios for opening up primary school lessons, such as circuits, free study time, weekly plans, projects and workshops, have been integrated into regular schools throughout the last decades. The degree of openness varies from school to school and teacher to teacher; this is partly due to the fact that primary school children stay with their primary school teacher for the four (in some areas of Germany six) years of primary school and have the majority of lessons with their class teacher. So although there are curricula that set the aims, there is a

lot of flexibility as to how to achieve them. This more open way of working with students, which I could observe in some of the classes, convinced me even more of this being the right way as the majority of students did not seem to see learning in the sense of tasks that they were required to fulfill, but in terms of something they themselves wanted to achieve. Another reason why this all made so much sense to me might also be the fact that I had grown up in an environment in which I was trusted to be able to take decisions from early on and, not surprisingly, have always tended to seek out environments with a similar kind of feel.

Primary English lessons turned out to be completely different from the rest of primary teaching. English was and is normally taught by subject teachers who only have limited time for a great amount of content to be taught and are dealing with absolute beginners for whom—that was and still is the conventional view—teacher talk is the most important source of input. Still convinced that there has to be a way of also opening up English lessons even in this kind of restrictive context, I designed open learning scenarios, with different types of media as an integral part, for and together with the students during my studies. I also observed and interviewed students in order to find out how much responsibility they can and want to take for their language learning at that age.

I came into the state primary school where I did my research from the outside, i.e. the university context, and could only change students' learning environment sporadically. Also, the freedom that the students had was mostly organizational, content-related and partly methodological, i.e. I could not turn their learning environment into a completely open one. Still, my results were very promising in that learners were very motivated when they were able to gain some control and choose contents, work independently and could explore the learning environment that was created by me, teachers at the primary school or themselves. They developed ownership for what they achieved and maintained their positive attitudes towards the language (see Wasch 2008). Not having had the chance of implementing the concept of LA, or openness respectively, completely, I do still

ask myself how far I could and would have gone if I had been their teacher as educational laws would certainly not have supported a truly democratic approach. Also, during the few years that I spent as a language teacher in England, I did struggle to open up my language lessons due to the very strict guidelines, and I only gradually managed to gain a bit more freedom for myself and the students. This question of how open I would like a learning environment to be, I will have to pursue in a new study or in the courses I teach at university.

When I reflect on my current teaching style at university, I have to say that I do tend to create relatively open learning environments, but that I certainly do have some way to go until I can say that I truly support students' autonomy. I do work with authentic tasks and projects in many courses, and my aim is always to enable students rather than to teach them. Just like others have stated before me, however, I do meet students who would need even more support and probably also time to get into this type of working. Also, especially in the mandatory courses in which we have agreed on a set curriculum and are working towards a final test, I find myself leading the class more than I would wish to at times.

So, also on the basis of my own need for discussion and development in this field, I am very much looking forward to more interaction with likeminded people: I am glad that I will have the chance to meet some of those people at our conference on *Involving Language Learners—Success Stories and Constraints* in November this year.

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Learner Autonomy—My personal success story!

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When I first came across the term learner autonomy in 2007, I was still a student at Duisburg-Essen University who was attending a course on



autonomous learning simply because it fit into his timetable. At that moment, I couldn't even divine that my academic and personal life was about to change radically.

The course lecturer, Dr. Katja Heim, an advocate of more autonomy in language learning already at the time, set us the task of doing small research projects on autonomy which were then to be presented in the final session. At the beginning of the course I was more than sceptical that autonomous learners can actually learn a language. While some teachers have rather practical concerns about autonomy (e.g. classroom management or behaviour), my doubts were of a more theoretical nature (e.g. motivation, grammatical knowledge, high level of language competence).

Over the course of my project on "autonomous school concepts in Germany" I felt more and more confident that autonomy would require more research in order to conceive an ultimate opinion. The concepts I looked at in those days were mainly individual concepts of learner autonomy. To take a single example, Nina Hagen, a famous German pop star, had opened a school in which children were supposed to learn autonomously. Yet, in the end, the concept turned out to be closer to anarchy than autonomy.

At the end of the seminar, I decided to write my Master's thesis on learner autonomy. It was a little later at the AILA World Congress of Applied Linguistics in 2008 that my supervisor Professor Bernd Rüschoff introduced me to Leni Dam. It was overwhelming to meet somebody who is so

inspired by learner autonomy. When she heard that I was planning to write my final thesis on learner autonomy she kindly offered to acquaint me with Frank Lacey, who most of you will know, in order to see "some" autonomy in practice. In 2009 I then started on my way to Frank's school, in a small place near Copenhagen.

The week with Frank was amazing in every respect: Learner and teacher autonomy were not simply empty theoretical concepts anymore, but a successful approach to learning and teaching in every respect. The instrumental case study, which I conducted during this week, has shown amazing, but also intriguing results regarding learner autonomy in practice. The main goal of the study was to find out more about autonomy in practice with a clear focus on the learners' perception of autonomy. Therefore, it made use of several qualitative data collection techniques such as questionnaires, group discussions as well as individual interviews. It was impressive to observe the achievements and challenges when teacher and learners try to learn autonomously. Now, almost a year later, a lot has changed: I have since graduated from Duisburg-Essen University and I have recently started my PhD. At the moment, we are planning the LA SIG event *Involving Language Learners: Success Stories and Constraints* at the University of Duisburg-Essen on November 26th in order to spread the idea of autonomy in Germany. What's more, for me personally, I am planning another trip to Denmark in 2011. It was not all that long ago that I was an opponent of learner autonomy, but now I feel that my "autonomous journey" is just about to start. Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Bernd Rüschoff and Frank Lacey for all the support they have shown to me! My special thanks go to Leni Dam and Katja Heim for their expertise, support and encouragement and, last but not least, to all those autonomous learners who managed to convince me in the end. You are great!

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My first steps towards autonomous learning

Vera Müller

Having been brought up in a teacher family and being positively affected by different group experiences, I have always been fascinated about being a teacher. In particular I liked the idea of accompanying students during an important period of time in their lives, giving them something to take with



minds and to strengthen their personal, social and professional skills.

After having studied for four and a half years at a University of Teacher Education in Lucerne, Switzerland, I was awarded with both the title of Master of Arts in Secondary Education and a teaching diploma in December 2009. The latter allows me to teach at secondary schools, which in Switzerland is grades 7-9 (the last three years of compulsory schooldays).

My first contact with autonomous learning came about three years ago in a university seminar, in which we not only read Leni Dam's book *From Theory to Classroom Practice* (1995) but also had the privilege of actually meeting her. A bit more than a year ago, I dared to take my own first steps towards autonomous learning. What started as an experiment in the framework of a teacher practicum ended in a small piece of research for my master's thesis in which I focused on learner autonomy in practice. I evolved, put into practice and evaluated three different approaches—a homework diary, a project work and an individual vocabulary list—for both the English and the French classes that I was teaching. Even though those attempts did not produce results only in favor of autonomous learning, I finished writing my master's thesis with the conviction that autonomous learning is indeed difficult but in

small steps is very realistic and even indispensable to implement.

This last January (2010) I took my first steps into teaching with a diploma. Over a period of three months I replaced a teacher who had participated in an advanced training course, and since then I have been replacing another teacher who is incapable of working because of burn out. Both replacements are at the same school in a town in which the students often have a migration background. The school is attended by about 300 teenagers, which means that it is a pretty big school for Swiss circumstances. The teachers are all very committed to their work—however the norm of how to teach or how to learn is still 'traditional': one works with a course book; in most cases the teachers decide the content of the lessons; and the tests usually contain questions which have to be answered by the students, etc. Yet 'newer' methods such as group puzzles, individual work schedules or carousel workshops are often included.

In January I started as a substitute teacher for the eighth grade (14- to 16-year-olds)—in two classes with 23 learners each and of medium level, which means that most of the pupils will not do further education but start an apprenticeship (e.g. to become a nurse). Given that I taught them English as well as French and that I was very motivated and willing to make an effort, I was very confident of trying out new ways of learning, such as giving them more freedom of choice in terms of content or social form, digressing from the course book or including more authentic materials. But I was soon brought back down to earth.

Everyday teaching (especially as a substitute for three months) proved to be much more complicated. I entered a classroom in which the students were unaccustomed to working independently (they didn't know how to learn best, they couldn't appraise their skills or their needs, ...) since it had always been the teacher who had decided how to work and what to do, and they were convinced that they needed exercises to improve their English. This was also reflected in their expectations of a young substitute teacher (*What will we learn with her? Will she do enough grammar and*

exercises?). On top of that (fortunately only in *one* class) the learners were not only unmotivated but also nasty to classmates, troublesome and insolent to teachers. For example, one group of learners would laugh at classmates who made English mistakes or who liked a certain type of music style (we worked with different songs); some were often talking across the classroom, even though a classmate was giving a short presentation; and some walked away or ignored you when you wanted to talk with them at the end of class. The class atmosphere was therefore rather negative; the learners were intimidated about showing if they thought something was fun to do.

With this starting position my first priority was to work on the formation of the class and to create an atmosphere in which everyone could learn: we talked lots (also in smaller groups), and the class was to formulate wishes and personal aims in particular with regard to the subject English, and as often as I could I offered them choice and included the wishes of the class, e.g. in choosing which songs they would listen to. But even with the songs they could choose themselves, there was always a group of learners who could not accept their classmates' choice despite the fact that we had just worked on "their" song. Since I was "just" a substitute, an additional difficulty for me was the expectation that I would keep working with the course book and that I would test the learner's new knowledge of the course book with conventional exams. It was always a difficult balancing act between my ideas, the learners' ideas and the 'main' teacher's ideas.

These factors, as well as the position of being a substitute, discouraged me more and more and I realized once more that there are many constraints that I would encounter on the way to autonomous learning (not as a substitute but in a situation in which I could decide what to try and where to go). There are those constraints which are often mentioned in the literature such as no support of the parties involved and the learner's attitudes, as well as their habits. But for me, as a young teacher who just had graduated from university, others add up:

Especially at the beginning and at this young age you have to prove yourself as a teacher. You have to show that you are capable of working with teenagers, that you

can lead them and that you can impart enough knowledge (which in secondary school language courses often equates with grammar). Teachers are always exposed to the many different expectations of different parties, but I believe that you are watched even more as a young teacher, especially from the parents' side. In addition my experience is that young teachers at the beginning are still in the process of defining their own role as a teacher and that their teacher identity (or at least mine) is not solid yet. Many questions such as what my personal educational self-conception is came up for me again and again. There are many situations also working with teenagers in which I am still insecure and don't have a wealth of experiences to which I can come back to. I can imagine that this situation of insecurity and lots of expectations quickly could lead someone into getting assimilated into existing teaching norms. I experienced myself that I often rather chose 'traditional' teaching methods than trying to work towards learner autonomy. This was probably due to a lack of strength, courage, conviction or support or because of pressure. However I believe that is important not to stereotype 'traditional' methods (and to accept myself that I come back to them)—since the learners are mostly used to those methods and since these methods mostly are the initial position to work from towards autonomous learning, e.g. when you show them how to learn (learning methods).

Another constraint which, in my opinion shouldn't be underestimated, is the fact that focusing on learner autonomy not only requires will but also energy and time, and in particular the last two are scarce when you start out teaching. You already struggle with your work anyway. There is so much to do and to learn around the actual teaching and the administrative work is increasing. Your capacity is very much limited and you have to pace yourself; in particular when you have got a class of 28 learners—a situation which I will encounter next term in the history class. However, we know from teachers' experiences that autonomous learners can also facilitate teachers' work. Looking towards next term, in particular towards the lesson with that huge class, my goal is to individualize my teaching as much as I can so that I will be able to spend

some time with small groups. This means to me that I will have to make sure that the goals of the curriculum, as well as my expectations, are transparent and that I invest a lot of time at the beginning to teach the learners how to learn and work in history.

While teaching as a substitute another question arose for me: Can you start working on the learner's autonomy in a classroom with indiscipline—with learners who are disrespectful or insolent to others, including the teachers? Or can autonomous learning even be helpful in creating a positive atmosphere in class? There is no doubt that relationships are a key for successful learning, but how do you integrate working on relations while heading for autonomous learning?

Despite the fact that the circumstances are not always in favor of autonomous learning (can they actually ever be or is this just an excuse on my part?), and despite the constraints which I may encounter on its way, I am still convinced of its positive value. Motivation, social or technical skills (how to learn, how to help myself, awareness, ...) definitely militate in favor of autonomous learning. I might not be sure yet about my own or my learners' way to get there, but I still believe that autonomous learning has to be a goal of general education towards which we need to move closer.

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