Book review: Autonomy in Language Learning: Stories of Practices Edited by Andy Barfield and Natanael Delgado Alvarado

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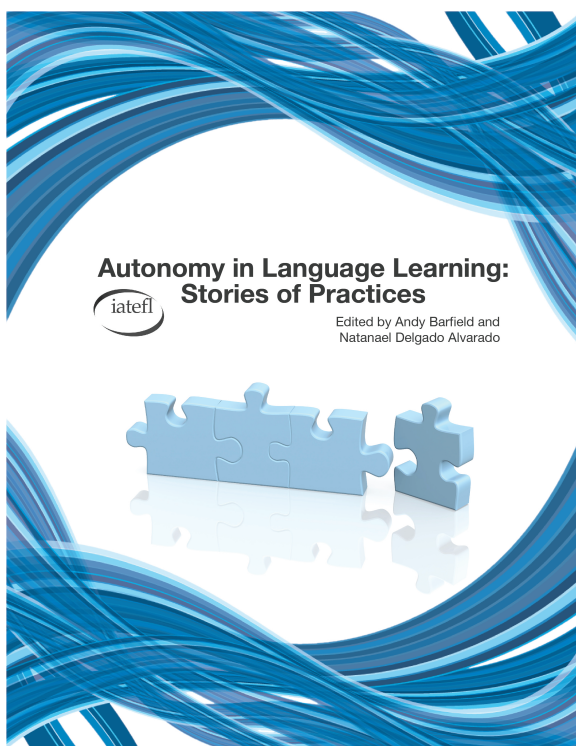
Autonomy in Language Learning: Stories of Practices edited by Andy Barfield and Natanael Delgado Alvarado is an e-book published by the IATEFL Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group (LA SIG). It is the third ebook in the Autonomy in Language Learning series and is available in ePub (for iPad, Kobo and other devices) and mobi (for Kindle) formats. An ebook format strengthens the structure of the book. First, it allows the reader to write and share comments on the text that spark reflection, admiration or empathy. Second, statements considered relevant for one's own practice can be highlighted.

Autonomy in Language Learning: Stories of practices is constructed from narratives of teachers/researches who have attempted to promote autonomy in different settings, sometimes in teacher-centered contexts, or when autonomy was not as recognized as a necessary ability to develop in learners as it is nowadays. When going through its pages, the reader becomes immersed in a diversity of worlds and can identify with the characters of the stories.

The e-book is divided into four sections. The first part focuses on attempts to develop a certain level of autonomy in children and teenagers; the second concentrates on college contexts; the third refers to self-access environments and the last part to teacher education. In addition, the structure of the anthology reveals the variety of scenarios where autonomy can be promoted, since there are educators from Asia, Europe and Latin America either as storytellers or responders.

The stories demonstrate that autonomy can be developed in different stages of education (e.g. primary, high school, college, tertiary level and teacher education) and at different ages (e.g. children, teenagers, and of course, adults). The book ends with a conclusion that is devoted to comments regarding the different narratives in this volume. It is worth mentioning that most of the storywriters have a career in language learning and are dedicated to a pedagogy of autonomy.

The chapters have an original way of presenting each story. Each is organized into two sections. First, the reader becomes acquainted with the storyteller who recounts his/her practice on how he/she has engaged in the path of developing autonomy and ways of implementing its pedagogy. This is followed by commentaries by two colleagues or "responders" from different countries from the storyteller, but who work with students of the same level or age. The comments consist of remarks about the experience as well as reflections the responder has raised through the narrative. Most of the time there are questions on issues that the reader considered were worth expanding or developing with a deeper insight by the storyteller. In the second section, the storyteller responds the questions and expands on the issues that have risen in the first part. The chapter concludes with the responders recapitulating the story they have just heard and it seems that both, storywriters and responders become more reflective about the issues raised. This exchange of ideas makes the reader feel part of the dialogue between the storyteller and his or her responders.

In the first part entitled *Stories of practices in primary/secondary/high school contexts,* Shu Hua Vivien Kao, Irina Minakova, Mehmet Boyno and Isabel Barbosa describe how they became acquainted with the concept of autonomy, and the way it had such an influence in their conception of learning and teaching. They worked in countries where the educational model is teacher-centered, so they had to overcome certain difficulties in order to implement the pedagogy of autonomy with young students. The eight responders of these stories concentrate on the sociological, political, personal and cultural factors to be considered when fostering of autonomy. What is remarkable in these four stories is their unbreakable enthusiasm, in spite of the several complications they encountered when trying to implement autonomy in their schools.

The second part, called *Stories of practices in university undergraduate contexts*, contains three stories that narrate the journey towards autonomy of three teachers when

they started to search for an effective teaching and learning approach. The storytellers in this part are Leena Karlsson, Diane Malcolm, and Steve Brown. In their quest, both storytellers and responders raise issues worthy of consideration. For example, in Leena's story, the storyteller and her responders discuss the idea of sociocultural autonomy and its development through collaborative work; in Diane´s story, her experience makes her responder think about what an autonomous teacher should be like; and Steve's story makes the reader reflect on how influential the context can be in the promotion of autonomy. Finally, in this section the reader will find the testimonies from students who have adopted autonomy in their learning interesting.

The third section is *Stories of practices in a self-access center* and contains stories from Pornapit Darasawang, Desirée Castillo Zaragoza, and Katherine Thornton. In this section, we can find experiences where there were almost no obstacles to navigate since the environment within these experiences could be the ideal one for the fostering of autonomy in learners. This section introduces three representatives from countries were SACs have been embraced: Latin-American and Asia. Pornapit from a university in Thailand surprises us with her experience of a systematic SAC whose aim is to promote autonomy through the different resources that students are provided with. Desireé tells us about her perception of SACs in México when she provides an overview of two kinds of SACs: one that focusses on learning and one that focusses on teaching. Katherine, who works in Japan, concentrates on her experience as a learning advisor and discusses how important this role has been in he promotion with autonomy.

A constant theme in the different stories in the book is the importance of the teacher as a resource to promote autonomy. In order to do this, teachers need to be trained to foster autonomy and to be autonomous. *Stories of practices in teacher education contexts* is made up of four stories that deal with the latter: fostering autonomy in teacher-trainees. Experts in this area tell us how they have their teacher-learners exercise their autonomy. The storytellers are: María Sara Rodríguez, Christian Ludwig, Simla Course, and Richard Smith. They -the story tellers and the responders- acknowledge that putting autonomy into practice implies being able to reconcile one's role as a teacher and as a learner, and to examine and rediscover the richness of past experiences for new practices.

Overall, the stories focus on both practical and theoretical issues related to the pedagogy of autonomy. Novices to the topic of autonomy will find in this book a good

source to get acquainted with the theory around fostering a sense of responsibility in language learners. In addition, readers new to the field can become acquainted with experiences of instrumenting autonomy that they could implement in their own particular contexts, and be prepared for the possible obstacles that they may encounter. What is more, readers can find a source of inspiration and motivation in order not to feel discourage when plans do not work as expected.

On the other hand, teachers and/or researchers who are already familiar with autonomy will encounter colleagues who may have gone through the same struggles and thoughts as them. They may find answers to their own questions or confirm that they are on the right path. Finally, readers can also meet other colleagues with similar interests.

Publication Information

Notes on the contributor

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