Book review: Assessment and Autonomy in Language Learning Edited by Carol J. Everhard and Linda Murphy

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At first glance the two key words, *assessment* and *autonomy* in the title seemed to contradict each other. Isn't assessment typically associated with formal learning systems and autonomy with out-of-class learning? Therefore it wasn't a surprise to see that Benson, in his foreword, says as much when he refers to assessment as "the elephant in the room" (p. viii) in discussions about learner autonomy. The six chapters in this edited book bring the elephant out into the open. The contributors, all of them academics as well as researchers, are or have been based in Australia, Bahrain, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Japan and the UAE. Most chapters start with the writers' interpretations of the word 'autonomy' in particular, and as befits the term's meaning, these ideas are varied. The book ends with a final list which combines references from all of the chapters, which makes sense, given that there was some overlap in sources from chapter to chapter.

In their Introduction, the two editors, Everhard and Murphy, suggest reasons why assessment and autonomy are not usually considered together before justifying the connection. As one example of this link they refer to self-assessment checklists in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The link continues in Everhard's literature review in the first chapter named "The assessment-autonomy relationship". A helpful table summarized the preferred terminology of autonomy experts" (p. 13) starting thirty years ago with the terms "teacher directed" and "student directed" and continuing to a 2003 reference which refers to "total dependence" versus "autonomy". Another table bringing together references that link autonomy with assessment shows that an interest in that connection actually dates back even earlier to the late seventies.

In Chapter 2 Murase reports from a Tokyo university on her doctoral study which takes a slightly different line from some of the chapters in that she is assessing autonomy amongst learners. She mentions first some problems, loosely grouped as technical and conceptual, that can arise in developing a measurement instrument. In looking for solutions to these problems she

describes four dimensions of autonomy: technical, psychological, political-philosophical and socio-cultural. The model was tried out on an impressive 1517 students and recommends this model, or "quantitative measurement instrument" (p. 54), as a tool which could be used for such assessment. Even readers who stop short of adopting the complete model could be interested in her 113 item checklist with which students can self-report.

A different model is offered in Chapter 3 by Tassinari from a university in Berlin, where the interest was in assessing "for autonomy" (p. 64). Like the previous writer, she starts by referring to the challenges involved in assessing the autonomy of language learners, and wondering whether language acquisition "can or should be assessed, tested and/or certificated at institutional level" (p. 68). Her chapter, too, is based on PhD studies. In presenting her model, she believes that self-assessment of their autonomy is useful for students' reflection "and even to regulate the learning process itself" (p. 88).

In Chapter 4 Cooker reports from the University of Nottingham on Assessment as Learner Autonomy which she sees as referring to "the development of the individual as much as it is about the development of the language of the learner" (p. 89). Her research process is labelled Q methodology, namely principles and techniques that lead the researcher to discover "opinions, perceptions and beliefs" (pp. 94-95). Cooker chooses easily-understood labels to categorise learners' responses in self-reports from the U.K. and Hong Kong in seven ways. Those categories include a "love of language learning", "oozing confidence" and "competitively driven" (pp. 97-98). Cooker's resulting model of autonomy is therefore perhaps easier for the reader to grasp than Murase's detailed but uncategorised list. Another helpful feature of the chapter is an Appendix including a page for each of six participants where they summarise their learning strategies and record suggestions from their friends on how to improve their learning.

Chapter 5 by Everhard is more specific, focusing only on oral skills but considering both peer- and self-assessment in a Greek university. A table comparing research studies from 1996 to 2010 sets the scene for this fresh investigation. Following the literature review, the author opens with an interesting reflection on collecting data from students in compulsory and in non-compulsory courses. As readers who are teachers would agree, being made to attend a class need not lead to engagement of the mind. Data is presented both statistically and anecdotally, the latter including (not surprisingly) contradictory comments made by students in a questionnaire after the study. While some referred to the possibility of cheating, others mentioned the need for

teachers to trust students. There were also comments about the impossibility of being objective in self- and peer-assessment.

One distinctive feature of Murphy's Chapter 6 from the U.K.'s Open University is that its context is language learning at a distance under a "closely controlled, mass-assessment system" (p. 144). The study assesses students' use of autonomy. Volunteers were sent materials which included reflection and self-assessment sheets amongst other resources. One happy outcome was students' reports that the time taken to complete these sheets was rewarded by the fact that their actual learning became easier.

In the eight-page Epilogue, Cotterall and Malcolm revisit the six chapters. Their comments are grouped first under two questions. "Can autonomy be assessed?" and "Why do it?" Suggestions follow to encourage readers to apply the reported findings. They conclude with their belief that what really matters in doing studies of this kind is "who is seeking to measure autonomy and how they intend to use the results" (p.173).

One impression of the book is its cohesion. Presumably the editors put out a call for contributions or perhaps they shoulder-tapped likely writers. Whichever the process was, the book has a strong sense of unity between chapters along with its diversity of settings. There is a difference between a cohesive, edited volume such as this and the special edition of a journal where all the articles may be on the same topic and yet the reader needs to make the connection between them.

In conclusion, in our field, as in others, a research topic is never finished. The reports published here open the door to future investigators to replicate or be inspired by the detailed lists of qualities presented.

Publication Information

Notes on the contributor

Marilyn Lewis used to teach on TESOL M.A. programmes and on Academic Writing courses at the University of Auckland. In her retirement she enjoys running workshops for teachers and language students in New Zealand and other countries. She also co-authors books on language