Interview with Jianying Du, Kerstin Dofs and Moira Hobbs on Friday, November 4th, 2016, Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST)

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Before the successful convening of the 7th International Conference of the Independent Learning Association (ILA) 2016 at HUST, Associate Professor Du in our School of Foreign Languages of HUST interviewed Kerstin Dofs and Moira Hobbs on November the 4th in the Figaro cafeteria on campus to gain further insight into independent learning. Both Kerstin and Moira come from New Zealand, where Kerstin is currently the Manager of the Language Self Access Centre (LSAC) at Ara Institute of Canterbury in Christchurch and Moira is the Manager of the Language (Self-Access) Learning Centre at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland. They are co-convenors assisting Jianying with arrangements for the ILA Conference at HUST.

The Independent Learning Association is an influential international academic organization and this is the 7th time for the international academic conference to be held, with the theme of 'Autonomy Within and Beyond the Classroom'.

The interview questions revolved around four main issues: (1) the distinction between independent learning and autonomous learning, (2) the relation between flipped class and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and independent learning, (3) the role of the teacher in independent learning, and (4) the specific education background or skills needed to be a good advisor.

Firstly, Kerstin and Moira discussed the concepts of independent learning and autonomous learning. They said the concepts are quite similar. However, to them the concept of independent learning means that the students are learning on their own, perhaps not even through an institution. Furthermore, autonomous learning means that the students themselves have the opportunity to decide what to learn, how to learn, and what resources to use, all within the context of their educational system. They are self-controlled, self-reliant, and interdependent rather than totally independent. In this process, learning how to learn is an important tool. Teachers of

autonomous learners can help them make plans, set goals and evaluate what they have done. As we are providing education at our institutions the teachers encourage students to be as autonomous as possible and the teacher does not necessarily need to decide everything.

Autonomous students may find their own ways to study, like going to a night class with a teacher, which could be a valid autonomous strategy. Sometimes, there exists a mixture of teacher instruction versus student self-direction in what to learn, and teacher control versus student control. Teachers may give classroom assignments before or after teaching sessions which students work on during out of class time, to make best use of students' time in the class, for example, for discussions and speaking practice, etc. Also, it is important to take account of the fact that, autonomous learning is not the same all around the world, since there are different education systems and various teachers use different methods to encourage students to learn differently. Both teachers and learners can decide when and where to be autonomous, and use appropriate autonomous learning strategies and techniques.

Next, Moira and Kerstin discussed the concept of flipped classroom situations, and studying via a MOOC. They stated that students may need to be more autonomous for blended on-line learning than for classroom tuition. As the work is done somewhere other than a classroom (for example, at home, in a library, under the trees), there are no traditional places or rooms, so the students themselves must be motivated to make sure they follow the course work and study well. Within the constraints of the curriculum and course work (and the associated assessments and tests) students are undertaking, they can decide what to do, what to learn, what to achieve, and when they do it. If the students are skilled in terms of their metacognitive knowledge about how they learn, and have suitable learning strategies, then they can succeed with these types of autonomous learning courses. While the advantage of flipped classrooms and MOOCs may be that it is easy to consolidate knowledge and it saves classroom and teacher time, this usually requires well-motivated students who understand their learning and can take responsibility for this. However, if the students are unmotivated, they are inclined to end up in failure, just as in a regular classroom.

Thirdly, Kerstin and Moira discussed the role of the teacher in autonomous learning. The teacher is not absent but can serve as an advisor, without giving detailed content information or a lecture. This can work well if students do reading or writing exercises at home and do listening and speaking tasks in class, as well as learning

strategies for all these skills and practicing these a bit in class. It is important that students have good access to quality materials.

Finally, they talked about the specific education background and skills to be a good advisor. In some respects, being a teacher seems to be contradictory to being an advisor. Teachers may need to learn specific tactics and techniques to be able to give autonomous learning advice well. There is often a challenge for teachers to help students understand that it is beneficial for them to take some responsibility and ownership for their own learning and take some control over what they are doing, instead of leaving it all to the teachers. They gave the example of Dr. Philip Riley who has shown clear differences between a teacher's attitude and an advisor's attitude and actions when working with learners. [In China, teachers typically teach grammar or tell students to do matching exercises and give more direct instruction than advisors – interviewer's comment]. Advisors are more like learning facilitators who help learners to discover how they learn best, what will be most useful to them, and offer them knowledge and skills to do this. In a language self-access center, lower level students sometimes require English teacher help to find resources, materials and suggestions about how to learn. It can be a big challenge to motivate all students who want guidance to find the answer.

Kerstin and Moira also discussed the need for professional development (PD) sessions for teachers, for example, guideline booklet activities and also classroom teacher instruction of autonomy and strategies for autonomy, followed by assessments (preferably also done by the students). They pointed out that it is a useful strategy for students to share what they have done and to teach each other, instead of learning entirely on their own, and with this kind of peer collaboration and cooperation, students can learn better. The student tutors benefit as they need to learn things on a much deeper level to be able to teach something to somebody else, and the person being taught may understand their peers better than they understand their teacher.

This gathering was a very enjoyable time for everyone, and the interview ended with a huge warm hug among Mrs Dofs, Mrs Hobbs, and Mrs Du.

Kerstin Dofs, Jianying Du, and Moira Hobbs