The Pedagogy of Learner Autonomy: Lessons from the Classroom

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Abstract

Learner autonomy in language learning has been the focus of enthusiastic investigation for the last 25 years. Research has focused on three key areas: the nature of autonomy, efforts to foster learner autonomy and the relationship between learner autonomy and effective language learning (Benson, 2011). This article focuses on the second area – the pedagogy of learner autonomy – and reports on insights gained from a career spent exploring learners' efforts to learn a language. The paper is organized around a pedagogical model (Cotterall & Murray, 2009; Murray, 2013) which aims to enhance learner engagement and autonomy. The model consists of five affordances - **engagement**, **exploration**, **personalization**, **reflection** and **support** – which emerged from analysing the interviews and written narratives of Japanese university students engaged in independent language learning. The paper first discusses each of the five affordances and the way they contribute to the quality of language learning opportunities (Crabbe, 2003) in a given environment. Next, the affordances are illustrated in relation to five different learning contexts in an attempt to highlight the diverse ways in which learner autonomy can be promoted. Rather than prescribe particular classroom activities, the model identifies principles which can guide pedagogical decision-making. The paper concludes by considering the model's potential as a set of guidelines for teachers who wish to promote learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, pedagogy, affordances

Within the field of research into learner autonomy in language learning, I see myself principally as a pedagogue and am usually happy to leave theory-building to colleagues. However, this paper emerges from an attempt to theorise what I have learned from 30 years spent trying to promote learner autonomy in a range of language teaching/learning contexts. It focuses on a pedagogical model developed by my colleague Garold Murray and myself while working together in Japan. The model, which aims to promote learner engagement and autonomy, consists of five affordances. In the paper I illustrate the model by reflecting on ways in which the affordances emerged (or otherwise) in a number of different learning-teaching contexts. The paper concludes by considering how the model might guide language teachers in creating environments in which their learners' autonomy can flourish.

The Pedagogical Model

The model was developed as the outcome of a 3-year research programme into independent language learning in a Japanese university (Cotterall & Murray, 2009). It

evolved from our analysis of qualitative and quantitative data gathered from 400 learners enrolled in an independent learning course over that period. The data included the learners' language learning histories, portfolios, language learning beliefs survey, course evaluations, interviews, and focus group discussions. The model emerged from our analysis of the learners' perceptions of the progress they had made in developing their language proficiency and enhancing their metacognitive knowledge and skill. After identifying a number of recurrent elements in the learners' reflections, we conceptualised them as representing **affordances** in the environment which enabled learner autonomy or independence to flourish.

Menezes (2011) makes the point that affordances are neither properties of the environment nor of the individual. Rather they are "something which emerges from the interaction between both" (p. 61). In other words, they are a kind of magic that is created when learners embrace a particular learning setting and exploit it as a way of stimulating growth, change and progress. This accounts for the fact that different individuals perceive different possibilities for action in the same set of circumstances and act on them in different ways. Consequently, in the context of our self-directed learning course, affordances are opportunities for interaction which learners perceive within the learning environment and either act on, or not.

The five affordances identified in our 1999 model are **engagement**, **exploration**, **personalization**, **reflection** and **support**. I argue here that by tracing the emergence (or absence) of each of these elements in a particular learning environment, we can better understand how we might enhance learning opportunities (Crabbe, 2003) in that setting. But first, a simple explanation of each of these elements is required.

Engagement

This affordance refers to the extent to which the pedagogic environment both allows for and encourages students to be **engaged** with the activities, topics, meanings, issues and concepts it focuses on. Unless learners are engaged by what is going on in the learning environment, there is no possibility that learner autonomy can flourish.

Exploration

The second affordance in our model is that of **exploration**. The learning setting must offer learners the opportunity to engage in genuine inquiry and expand their understanding of topics and ideas which matter to them. This means that the issues they explore in their language learning should not be trivial; on the contrary, they should

represent authentic questions (of personal significance to the learners) which demand real answers. Gone are the days when it was acceptable to ask language learners to complete artificial tasks (I am reminded of the 'display questions' of my early language teaching career) simply as a way of practising selected language forms.

Personalization

Learners need to perceive **personal relevance** in the issues and activities we invite them to participate in. This represents a huge challenge for teachers since every learner has a unique set of interests and capabilities. It is therefore vital that learning curricula be open-ended and learner-centred. While, once upon a time this may have represented a major challenge for teachers, today it can be viewed as an essential and hugely positive reason for focusing on individual learners and their diverse motivations for learning the language.

Reflection

Many years of empirical research and classroom-centred practice have highlighted the central role of metacognition in effective language learning (Anderson, 2012). According to this view, for learning to become established, learners need to reflect on what they have done, achieved and discovered. Without **reflection**, learners cannot assess their past learning and learn from it as they make plans for future action. Language teachers should therefore aim to create opportunities for **reflection** in the learning environment.

Support

The final element in our pedagogic model is that of **support**. As Vygotsky (1986) demonstrated, given **support**, learners are capable of achieving more than they can achieve alone. Language learning is no exception. Part of the pedagogue's task is to anticipate the kind of **support** that learners need in order to achieve tasks that outstrip their current resources.

Looking for Learner Autonomy in Different Pedagogical Contexts

This section illustrates the model by analyzing five contexts in which I have taught and considering the extent to which each of the model's affordances emerged (or not) in the respective learning environment.

Public servants learning English at a language school in Paris, France

One of my earliest teaching experiences involved teaching English to adults in a large commercial language school in Paris. At that time, I had a very rudimentary understanding of the language learning process and little knowledge of the principles of learning and teaching. In that school, neither teachers nor learners had the freedom to move beyond the prescribed textbook. The curriculum was outdated and rigid and the teaching materials were seriously inadequate. For instance, one memorable sequence in the textbook required the teacher to point to a picture of a man sitting in a restaurant and ask the learners – "Is this a man or a dog?". Needless to say, when language learning is presented in such a meaningless way, **engagement** and **exploration** cannot thrive.

To make matters worse, many of the learners were required to attend classes as part of their employers' obligation to provide professional development for its employees. Few of them had a genuine need to learn English or any personal motivation. I was therefore engaged in TENOR – Teaching English for No Obvious Reason. While it is true that the teacher's role is to make learning **engaging** even where resources are limited, the challenge I faced in teaching those students in Paris was overwhelming.

As Table 1 indicates, (✓ = yes and ✗ = no), the learners were not engaged in anything remotely resembling intellectual **exploration** during lessons at the school. Instead, they were exposed week after week to the same formulaic, unimaginative materials delivered by mostly inexperienced teachers. In addition, there was no opportunity for the teacher to **personalize** the teaching activities. Any efforts to target the interests of individual learners were thwarted by the school's policy of rotating teachers around the different Paris branches of the school. Given these constraints, the learning environment was far from **supportive** or stimulating, and there was simply no time to encourage learners to **reflect** on their learning. Given the choice, few learners would have opted to continue with their classes.

Table 1. Affordances in Different Learning/Teaching Contexts

	Engagement	Exploration	Personalization	Reflection	Support
Adults learning English in a language school in France	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
International students learning EAP in New Zealand	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Learner of Spanish at university in New Zealand	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
Adult learners of English in Japan – learning independently	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Undergraduate students of academic writing in the United Arab Emirates	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

International students learning English for Academic Purposes at university in New Zealand

Approximately ten years later, I found myself teaching in a much more positive environment working with international students who were preparing to enter university in New Zealand. In most cases, the students had already been granted admission to their university courses on condition that they reach a particular level of English proficiency at the end of the EAP course. Consequently, most were highly **engaged.** The stakes were high, and their impatience to begin their degree courses was palpable.

Students in the EAP programme (who mostly came from South East Asian countries), met in class groups in the mornings and participated in elective courses in the afternoons. Convinced that learners' ability to **reflect** critically on their learning was an essential element of learning to learn effectively, the programme designers had incorporated a number of **reflection**-promoting features in the course. As Dam and Legenhausen (1999) argued:

> In an autonomous classroom . . . [evaluation] is viewed as the pivot
> of a good learning/teaching cycle . . . Evaluation has a retrospective
> and prospective function, in which the learning experiences of the

past are *reflected* [italics added] upon and transformed into plans

for future action. (p. 90)

One important strategy for promoting **reflection** involved incorporating 'metacognitive commentary' in the in-house language learning materials (see Figure 1 below):

Task 2   Reading for the gist

*Before you read a text, you should stop and think about **why** you are reading it. This will help you choose a strategy that matches your reason for reading. Effective readers employ a range of different strategies such as reading for the gist, reading to locate specific information and reading to develop fluency. The strategy they use depends on their **purpose** for reading.*

Look at Text A and ….

Figure 1. Extract from In-house Materials (English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, 1991)

However this focus on the ***how*** of language learning seemed novel for many learners. Some were more comfortable using journal entries for their reflections. Simple prompts asked learners to write briefly about what they had found easy, difficult, interesting or helpful during the week. Entries were then shared with the teacher who sought (in writing) to prompt further **reflection**. These journal dialogues also proved valuable in providing individualized **support**, since they enabled learners to ask for help with particular issues or to inform teachers of their personal interests.

Perhaps the most highly valued kind of **support** offered in the programme was learners' opportunity to meet formally with their class teacher twice during the 12 week course to discuss progress and learning plans. Such was learners' enthusiasm for these interviews that it was sometimes difficult to limit conversations to the allocated 30 minutes. The smaller ticks in Table 1 for the cells labelled Exploration and Personalization indicate however that opportunities for learners to **explore** ideas of personal interest were less rich, given the predetermined study themes and curriculum.

Learner of Spanish at a university in New Zealand

The third context in which I wish to explore our model is that of foreign language learning at a university in New Zealand. Some years ago, I had the opportunity to track two learners enrolled in a first-year Spanish course at a university. The learners agreed to attend fortnightly interviews throughout the semester during which they discussed their language learning experiences and progress with me. One of the learners, Harry, paints a dramatic picture of what happens when learning is NOT **personalized** (Cotterall, 2005).

Harry was an intelligent, mature student majoring in Philosophy and English Literature. He decided to enrol in Spanish so that he could communicate with people from Spain and Latin America and experience some of the 'passion and colour' of the country. Harry was thrilled when his classmates elected him President of the Spanish Club and enthusiastically started planning a semester of film nights, flamenco, tapas and sangria. Sadly, however, his learning experience offered him little opportunity to **explore** his interests, feed his imagination or **personalize** his learning.

Very soon our fortnightly sessions became dominated by Harry's complaints about the meaningless focus on form and lack of stimulus in the activities he was required to complete. Whereas he had enrolled in order to explore his Spanish L2 self (Dörnyei, 2009), essentially the course required him to complete grammar exercises and translate written texts. What was worse, Harry's lack of success at memorizing verb conjugations or vocabulary resulted in damaging his L2 ego until he concluded that language learning was "all just rules" (Cotterall, 2005).

In fact, it would not have been difficult for teachers to **personalize** some of Harry's class activities, but **engaging** the learners did not seem to figure prominently on the course instructor's agenda. At the end of the study, when I asked for feedback on the manuscript I had written about his experience, Harry replied saying:

> I personally think that living languages require learners who actively participate in breathing life into them. For me, Spanish was transformed from an enticingly colourful exciting promise into something flat, boring, uninspired and tedious … as the course went on, I felt little affinity with my classmates and therefore felt no desire to contribute to their experience ...
> (Cotterall, 2005)

Harry's words express the dismay he experienced as a result of having no opportunity to **explore** personally relevant ideas or **engage** with classmates during the course. This is sad, given that, in my experience, even a modest attempt to make connections between course content and learners' identities, interests and goals are likely to result in more **engaged** learners. Unfortunately, the opposite was true for Harry. Eventually the course killed in him any desire to learn a foreign language.

Adult learners of English in Japan, learning independently

The fourth context I wish to discuss is the most exciting language learning context in which I have worked. From 2005 to 2008, in addition to teaching at a university, I worked as a language adviser in the Center for Independent Language Learning (CILL) in Akita, Japan established by my colleague Garold Murray. The CILL was the least institutional setting in which I have worked with language learners, and represents an excellent example of learner **support and personalization**. At the CILL learners registered as 'members' so they could work independently on their language learning while making use of the CILL's resources. There were no teachers, no lessons and no exams. The Centre was open 6 days a week and employed two staff members who provided technical assistance as well as cataloguing, maintaining and developing language learning resources. CILL members were an eclectic group of learners (ranging in age from 18 to 80) who included business people, retirees, homemakers, university students, public service officials and secondary school students. Many visited the centre every day. However, whereas the CILL was distinctive for not providing a curriculum, teaching or conventional assessment, it provided **support** in abundance.

The first kind of **support** was provided by the two full time staff members who worked in the Centre. They were there to welcome and interact with learners (in English and Japanese) and help them use the CILL materials. More formally, when members first registered at the CILL, each took part in an initial interview with one of the centre advisers (Garold or myself). The focus of the interview was on helping the learner identify some realistic goals and assess their approximate level in relation to the materials available in the centre.

The second kind of **support** provided was access to a one-on-one learning advising session once a week. These sessions were sometimes conducted in Japanese, but the agenda was always the same; learners requested a session when they wished to ask about their

progress or discuss a problem they were experiencing. As a result of these sessions, our relationships with regular members developed in a way that helped a learning community to develop.

The third example of **support** was regular seminars provided on topics such as vocabulary learning, listening strategies or independent language learning itself. These were offered on Saturday mornings and were always well attended. Naturally a large amount of **support** was also provided through the texts, learning resources, technology and documentation we developed for the CILL. Learners who had difficulty understanding spoken English for instance, were directed to graded readers with audio recordings or TV programmes with subtitles in Japanese and English. In addition, over time we produced a bank of Strategy guides (in Japanese and English) in which we summarized advice about ways of addressing different language goals such as expanding vocabulary or improving listening skills.

However, perhaps the most unique kind of **support** was the community itself. Members came to know each other through meeting regularly at the Centre, attending special CILL events such as Christmas and Easter celebrations, and taking part in regular events such as movie nights. One of the Japanese CILL workers believed that members' relationships defied conventional Japanese social norms in that friendships developed rapidly and certain relationship rules did not seem to apply. For instance, some CILL members began socializing together outside the centre after having known each other for only a matter of weeks; typically relationships amongst Japanese people form over much longer periods of time. The 'foreign-ness' of this unique language learning environment may have helped make this possible.

Other affordances which emerged in the CILL setting, as Table 1 indicates, were authentic learner **engagement** and **personalization** of their learning. For instance, one member had a daughter living in France married to a Frenchman. Saito-san's[1] goal was to be able to communicate with her son-in-law using English, their lingua franca. Accordingly she visited the CILL 5 times every week and worked on the vocabulary and listening skills she needed in order to be able to communicate with her son-in-law in English about the issues that mattered to her.

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[1] Not her real name

Undergraduate students of academic writing, United Arab Emirates

Finally, I would like to consider my most recent teaching context in relation to our model. From 2012 to 2016 I taught a research writing course (in English) to undergraduates at a university in the United Arab Emirates. In this course, learners were asked to explore an issue that they genuinely wished to know more about. While this might sound like a standard approach to course design, some writing courses seem to focus on issues that are already familiar for the learners and which therefore do not offer the opportunity for genuine **exploration**.

One of the challenges I have encountered in attempting to make **exploration** a feature of the pedagogical environment is learner resistance. By the time students arrive at university, they have been exposed to a range of teaching approaches, many of which assign them a passive role. If, in the past, they have been prevented from making choices about the focus of their classes, they can be reluctant to accept this responsibility.

Over a four year period teaching the research writing course, I observed my students **engage** with a huge range of issues and gain confidence in arguing a case. For the sake of coherence, I asked that all their research projects relate in some way to the UAE. Consequently, learners were able to share readings and debate common issues. Over the years, learners explored issues such as the causes of the horrendous road toll, the increasing rate of divorce amongst Emiratis, and the growing incidence of obesity amongst UAE residents. But the most memorable student research paper for me was that of a Syrian student who investigated reasons for the high cost of tuition at the university. His motivation for **exploring** this topic was his sense of personal guilt at the enormous financial sacrifice his family in Syria had made in order to fund his studies. The final draft of Said's research paper was the best I read in four years of teaching the course. His success was due in part, no doubt, to his strong personal motivation for writing about the topic.

In addition to creating a learning environment in which **engagement** and **exploration** were fostered, the course provided high levels of learner **support** through constant conferencing and extensive oral and written feedback (from peers and the teacher) on successive drafts. While producing their research papers, learners not only discovered and shared new knowledge, but also learned to critique existing knowledge, practices and policies – a key goal of university education. The entire approach was based on **personalizing** the research. Opportunities for learners to **reflect** on their learning (about writing and about

research) were offered throughout the course but for most students, understandably, the project itself (the *content* rather than the *process*) tended to dominate.

Pedagogical Implications

So, what do these five stories tell us about the pedagogical model? First of all, I hope they reflect a profound respect for the learner. Any attempt to create a learning environment rich in these affordances should be based on an understanding that the most important element in the learning situation is the learner. Armed with an understanding of the conditions needed for effective language learning and knowledge of our learners' needs, pedagogues are able to shape the learning environment in a way that favours effective language learning.

Second, I hope this discussion highlights the feasibility of promoting learner autonomy in vastly different learning contexts and learners. If we believe the affordances in the model are important, we need to think of ways of creating the conditions where they can flourish. However, there is no need for us to engage in this endeavour alone. By inviting learners to talk about what most interests and motivates them, we can learn better how to help.

Third, I hope that my analysis of the five different settings has highlighted ways in which the different affordances overlap and interact. While the model may provide a useful heuristic method for investigating and analyzing different language learning settings, it is of course artificial to view these affordances as discrete phenomena. Taken together, the affordances provide a means of evaluating the language learning environments where we are operating, and considering ways in which the context could be manipulated in order to enhance the learning opportunities.

Engagement

If learners are to be fully engaged in their language learning, their teachers need to know them well enough to be able to create appropriate links between the learners and the learning activities. Using learners' texts is likely to increase **engagement**. Last semester in my academic writing class, I talked to learners about the importance of making the first few sentences of their research papers attractive for the reader. While the principle I was discussing might have been clear, naturally enough, one learner asked me for examples. So overnight I cut and pasted into a handout the first few sentences of each learner's paper.

Underneath each student extract, I listed a couple of strategies which I believed would make their opening livelier, as in the following example:

> *Student early draft*: Attaining social, economic and environmental sustainability is a national aim for advanced countries. Since the United Arab Emirates' land is arid, desalination plays a major role in providing UAE's citizens with the government's subsidized free, or almost free potable water**.**

> *Teacher commentary:* I suggest you highlight some of the contrasts in the UAE context e.g. material wealth v scarcity of water; economic wealth v environmental degradation. Try to add some drama and contrast; use hyperbole to create an impact with your opening sentences.

> *Student final draft:* Although the United Arab Emirates is the land of lavish wealth and opportunities, its people may go thirsty in the near future. The tragedy of the UAE is the poverty of its fresh water resources. While the land is rich in oil, it is also extremely arid and barren, which threatens its environmental sustainability.

This task successfully **engaged** even the most reluctant writers. Many reported that although they found it challenging to evaluate their classmates' introductions, the strategy was easy to apply to their own work.

Exploration

If we accept that **exploration** is a key affordance of autonomous language learning, we need to ensure that our materials and tasks stimulate genuine curiosity and allow for multiple, diverse responses. Whether we are teaching reading or writing skills, or providing speaking and listening practice, there must be *an element of the unknown* in the tasks, the texts, the procedures and the outcomes. In this way, language learning proceeds through an authentic search for meaning.

Personalization

The implication of teachers embracing the principle of personalization is obvious. It begins with a requirement that teachers really know their learners so that they can cater effectively to their needs, interests and learning styles. It also requires an ongoing

conversation with learners and an openness to incorporating their interests. Often this results in increased preparation time. But resisting learners' wishes is futile. If they cannot see how the subject matter and tasks relate to them, learning will not be effective. The other implication is that diverse approaches are needed, since individual learners will prefer different types of activities. This makes the teacher's job both more complex and more demanding. However, it also makes the learning more real.

Reflection

Acknowledging the importance of **reflection** in autonomous language learning demands that teachers constantly focus on transferring particular learning into general insights. While much classroom discourse is dominated by talk about a particular text or task, if it is to be useful, today's task must enhance tomorrow's learning (Paul Nation, personal communication). This is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. For instance, after a group of learners finish working with a particular written text, it is essential that the teacher connect that learning experience to a discussion of what makes reading **any text** easy or difficult. I see this as a kind of two-dimensional dialogue; in fact, this was the reasoning behind our incorporating 'metacognitive commentary' into our early language learning materials at Victoria University of Wellington. If we converse with our learners only about **particular** texts or tasks, we are not helping them understand how they can continue learning independently in the future.

Support

The pedagogical implications of providing appropriate learning **support** are profound. It is our responsibility to create learning environments where the activities we engage our learners with are achievable, given the range of scaffolds we have provided. Once again, this implies that teachers know their learners well enough to be able to accurately anticipate the kind of **support** they need. It also implies that the learning environment is one in which learners feel comfortable asking for help. Most classroom teachers are expert at providing structured ways to **support** learners, through conferences, email, in-class discussions, and written and oral feedback. We also need to systematically build **support** into our materials and activities.

Conclusion

I am not proposing a neat formula for classroom practice – a kind of PPP of autonomy. Rather, I am suggesting the kind of language learning environments and

opportunities and environments needed for learners to learn to be effective independent learners. There is no doubt that it is challenging to ensure these affordances can emerge in the language learning contexts where we work. It is, however, an important and worthy goal. Collaborating with learners in order to create these opportunities is essential if we wish to facilitate effective language learning.

Notes on the Contributor

Sara Cotterall has conducted research into learner autonomy in language learning for more than 30 years. She is a former convenor of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning (19986-2002) and has taught in Australasia, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Sara is currently an Adjunct Research Fellow at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

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