



REVIEW ARTICLE

TEACHING AND RESEARCHING AUTONOMY (SECOND EDITION) PHIL BENSON  
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ABSTRACT

Autonomy has become a keyword of language policy in educational systems around the world as the importance of independent learning and new technologies has grown. For many language teachers, autonomy is an attractive idea in theory, but somewhat far-fetched and idealistic in practice. Nevertheless, autonomy has enjoyed a long and respected tradition in educational, psychological and philosophical thought. The concept of autonomy in language learning is well researched at the level of theory and practice and has proved to be adaptable and responsive to change and supported by evidence that learners naturally tend to exercise control over their learning both generally and in the field of language learning. It can in essence be considered a systematic capacity of the learner for effective control over various aspects and levels of the learning process. The real challenge confronting the field is however to arrive at a non-controversial account of the construct of autonomy and of the relative weight and of the importance various dimensions of control exert within a solid framework of practice. The present article aims to review and highlight, in an outline manner, the most important theoretical considerations Phil Benson discusses in his seminal book entitled 'Teaching and Researching Autonomy' in a bid to provide a firm theoretical background of the issues concerned. This will hopefully pave the way for a better understanding of the various strands attached to the concept of autonomy and foster more learned practical engagements of the concept.

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INTRODUCTION

Setting the Scene

'Teaching and Researching Autonomy – 2nd edition' by Phil Benson is one of the books in the series 'Applied Linguistics in Action' edited by Christopher Candlin and David R. Hall. The editors in the General Editor's Preface claim that this version of the book provides a clear, up-to-date and accessible, authoritative account of topics within applied linguistics. Indeed it is so. The book focuses on the issues and challenges autonomy as a key concept in language education puts before teachers and researchers in the field and provides them with the contextual theoretical knowledge and concepts as well as the tools they may need in carrying out their own practice-related research in spite of the very evasive nature of the core idea.

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For the sake of compartmentalization and in line with the author's own division of the book into four major sections of which section one (xi +120) is mainly focused on theoretical issues, we have decided to base the present review on section I only in a bid to prepare the forum for all academics especially practicing teachers, including ourselves, to gain a more profound information and understanding of the concept of autonomy which, as previously stated, as a key concept in language education has been influencing activities such as self-access, motivation, learner training, classroom practice and to a lesser degree curriculum design. Section I carries the general title of "What is Autonomy" and covers five chapters sub-divided into various topics/concerns to which we will refer to later in this review and a two-page conclusion as chapter (6). This section focuses on the origins and development of the concept of autonomy in language learning, definitions of key terms and research evidence that enables us to describe autonomy in terms of various dimensions of control over learning. Thus, in a manner of summarizing, this section;

- Outlines the history of autonomy in language learning and identify its sources in the fields of language pedagogy, educational reform, adult education, the psychology of learning and political philosophy;
- Discusses definitions of autonomy and key issues in research;
- Explains why autonomy is a key issue in language education today.

The list of contents of section I is outlined as such:

## Chapter (1)

### 1. The history of autonomy in language learning

- 1.1 Origins of the concept
- 1.2 Autonomy and self-access
- 1.3 Autonomy and learner training
- 1.4 Autonomy and Individualization
- 1.5 Autonomy and interdependence
- 1.6 Why autonomy? Why now?
- 1.7 The two faces of autonomy

In a general outlook of this chapter, Benson runs through an excellent outline of the history and origins of autonomy in language learning (1) where he holds that the theory of autonomy in language learning has been essentially concerned with the organization of formal education. He posits that the boom in philosophical writings during the past two to three decades tells us that SLA predates institutionalized language learning by many centuries but our present-day concern with autonomy has a very modern character. Self-access language learning he says “is often treated as synonymous with self-directed or autonomous learning” and cautions for some pedagogical rationale and suitable technology (1.2) & (1.3). The running thread that links the definitions of autonomy presented represent a remarkable consensus around the idea that autonomy, basically, involves learners taking more control over their learning. In part (1.4) & (1.5) this definition is elaborated and linked to the philosophical idea of personal autonomy sought by people/learners for greater control over their lives. The present-day interest in autonomy in language learning reflects concern with the meaning and impact of language learning on students whose individuality is suppressed in modern mass educational systems. It is reminiscent of the pensive lyrics of the Pink Floyd’s single in the 1980’s which goes like this: [...*We don’t need no education! We don’t need no forced control!... Hey teacher! LEAVE US KIDS ALONE... all in all we are just another brick in the wall....*]. That is indicative of the gist of the ‘two faces of autonomy’ to which Phil Benson refers to in (1.7) and the last sub-division of chapter (1) that the rise of autonomy corresponds, at least partly, to an ideological shift away from consumerism and materialism towards an emphasis on the meaning and value of personal experience, understanding, maybe freedom in the sense of free thinkers, and quality of existence. With this note the chapter comes to its conclusion.

## Chapter (2)

### 2. Autonomy beyond the field of language education

- 2.1 Educational reform
- 2.2 Adult education
- 2.3 The psychology of learning
- 2.4 The philosophy of personal autonomy
- 2.5 Autonomy in language learning and its sources

Phil Benson starts chapter two of the book by stating that “the concept of autonomy is not originally or primarily a language-learning one and relates the term to other fields such as educational reform, adult education, psychology of learning and political philosophy of the twentieth century”. In (2.1), He proceeds to present a more detailed discussion of autonomy in language learning through introducing ideas on education by renowned figures in the field as follows:

- (i) Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophical view of the human subject as intrinsically good tied with the social order where reasoning of the learner in a permissive natural education is advocated. Critics see Rousseau’s educational theory as “too romantic” whereas those in favour of his stipulations regard his emphasis on the learner’s responsibility for learning presents a key idea of autonomy.
- (ii) John Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy sees education as a vital philosophical issue. His contribution to the idea of autonomy lies mainly in three areas: the relationship between education and social participation, education as problem solving, and classroom organization.
- (iii) William Kilpatrick who is a pro-Rousseau advocate, distinguishes himself by his “project method” contribution to the idea of autonomy where he suggests students plan and execute their own learning projects through *construction projects; enjoyment projects; problem projects, and specific language projects.*
- (iv) Paolo Freire who combines educational and political goals, argues that responsibility is a fundamental human need. However, the contribution of his theory to the theory of autonomy lies mainly in its emphasis on the need to address issues of power and control in the classroom within broader social and political contexts.
- (v) Ivan Illich’s de-schooling argues that schooling is not only unnecessary and economically misguided, but also “anti-educational”.
- (vi) Carl Rogers work on humanistic psychology too adopts Rousseau’s view and conceives of individuals as ‘self-actualising’ beings striving for autonomy in various domains. His main contribution, however, lies in his reconceptualization of the role of teacher as *facilitator* in the classroom.

Subsection (2.2) is on the issue of adult education and its relation to self-directed learning and autonomy where the distinction between the concept of self-directed learning as a global capacity mode of learning and autonomy as an attribute of the learner is discussed. (2.3) dwells upon the topic of psychology of learning. The first part of this sub-section (2.3.1) deals with the constructivist theories of learning which holds that ‘knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner’. Kelly’s (1963) personal construct theory, developed in the field of psychology, posits that personal constructs are derived from shared assumptions and values but systems of constructs are unique to the individual. Quotes from

Little (1991) on relevance of personal construct and autonomy ; Barnes's (1976) ideas on school knowledge and action knowledge as well as Vygotsky's arguments in favour of group work and autonomy help to clarify the related topics. The second part of this subsection (2.3.2) makes reference to Zimmerman's (1998) definition of self-regulation as "the self-directive process through which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills". (2.3.3) speaks of Harri-Augstein and Thomas's point of view on learning conversations. Social approaches to learning theory suggested by Lantolf *et al.* 2008 is what you read in (2.3.4). Schooling and identity by Lave and Wenger (1991) as well as autonomy and agency in language learning by Lim (2003) are also to be found in this sub sub-section. The penultimate part of this chapter, that is (2.4) is entitled "The philosophy of personal autonomy". Here, we get acquainted with the works and ideas of eighteenth and nineteenth – century European philosophers such as Kant and Stuart Mill on autonomy. Kant's ideal of society of self-governing individuals and Mill's ideal of a society based on mutual respect for individual freedom carry their bearings on autonomy which cannot be overlooked.

(2.4.1), in its turn, spells out Raz's beliefs on personal autonomy and the duties of the State in which he lives. Wall's account of the requirements of personal autonomy is also quoted and dwelt upon in (2.4.2). This sub-section ends with a Freireian critique of educational paternalism. Sub-section (2.5) "autonomy in language learning and its sources" is the conclusion to chapter two of the book and relates that research on autonomy in language learning shares some of its sources with the humanistic, communicative and task-based approaches to language education. Reviewers, too, would like to point out here that in the context of language education, the more convincing arguments for autonomy are likely to be pedagogical rather than political or philosophical. Yet we should realize that pedagogical decisions in respect to autonomy are often based upon underlying political and philosophical assumptions.

### Chapter (3)

- 3 Defining and describing autonomy
- 3.1 Dimensions of autonomy
- 3.2 Versions of autonomy
- 3.3 Measuring autonomy
- 3.4 Autonomy and culture

This chapter of the book is, in our opinion, one of the most exciting, thought-provoking and barrier breaking parts of the whole book and especially the first section of the book on theoretical aspects on autonomy in that it sharpens our understanding of what autonomy in language learning might encapsulate. Autonomy as a construct is researchable only when it becomes describable in terms of observable phenomenon in language learning. The challenge lies exactly in this concept. Little (1990) provides an excellent prelude in quote 3.1 on "what autonomy is not". Subsection (3.1) starts with Holec's (1981) elaboration on the basic definition of autonomy which reads as "the ability to take charge of/ control one's own learning". Essentially autonomy is a cognitive capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making,

and independent action. But nothing is said about the nature of that capacity, let alone specify what cognitive capacities are needed for effective self-image leading to autonomy. Any adequate description of autonomy in language learning must exhibit at least three dimensions of control: (i) learning management, (ii) cognitive processes, and (iii) learning content. (3.2) Benson identified technical, psychological and political 'versions' of autonomy in a paper in 1997. Relating these versions to the dimensions of autonomy in this chapter, technical versions would focus mainly on learning management; psychological versions on cognitive processes, and political versions on learning content. Mention is made of Littlewood's three-stage model for the development of autonomy based on dimensions of language acquisition, learning approach and personal development. His distinction between 'proactive' and 'reactive' autonomy is also introduced. Smith's ideas on weak and strong pedagogies for autonomy has been stated which has been taken up by Allwright and Hanks (2009) and the idea is related to the interests of commercial language teaching publishers in packaging and promoting competing methods.

Sub-part (3.3) deals with measuring autonomy and the stumbling blocks which loom in the way of measuring this construct. For a full discussion of the issue it is best to read the original text. This is because the operationalization of this construct and the range of its variability is indeed a very important and delicate issue which cannot be taken lightly. The whole success of research in this area, whatever it may be, is directly dependent on this slippery subject. Therefore to wrap up chapter (3) of the book, it should be said that in this chapter as a whole, Benson tries to define learner autonomy as the capacity to control one's own learning and suggests that it is difficult to define autonomy more precisely than this because learning can be controlled in a variety of ways.

### Chapter (4)

- 4 Control as a natural attribute of learning
- 4.1 Self-management in learning
- 4.2 Learner agendas in the classroom
- 4.3 Control of psychological factors influencing learning
- 4.4 The seeds of autonomy

The overall aim of chapter (4) has been to identify research evidence to support the hypothesis that control is a natural feature of language learning. Thomson (1996), for example, has argued that we are born self-directed learners. As young children, we take control over the learning of our mother tongue through computational statistics and constraints, but the learning becomes more complex and channeled and we appear to forsake much of our autonomy. We can therefore postulate that learner autonomy can grow from seeds that may be already be present in student's learning upon which it can be build up. Autonomy implies not only the attempt to take control of one's own learning from time to time (4.1) (i.e., self-management), but also the capacity to do this systematically (4.2) and effectively in terms of self-determined goals and purposes (4.3). Here it is stressed that fostering autonomy does not mean simply leaving learners to their own whims and devices, but

implies a more active process of guidance and encouragement to help learners. Therefore autonomy is a capacity that can be developed. How? This is what we will see in the next chapter where the dimension of control is discussed.

## Chapter (5)

### 5. Dimensions of control

- 5.1 Control over learning management
- 5.2 Control over cognitive processing
- 5.3 Control over learning content
- 5.4 Describing the autonomous learner

This chapter explores the possibility of describing language learner autonomy more comprehensively as a capacity that can be developed and the need for a broader picture in terms of developing this potential for learner control over language learning. Benson suggests the forms learner autonomy could take will differ according to the person and the context.

The description starts with control over learning management (5.1) as the behaviours involved in planning, organization and evaluation of learning. But the problem here lies in the fact that learning behaviours of autonomous learners depicts what they need to be able to do as tasks and it does not describe the mental capacities underlying those behaviours which are capabilities related to cognitive and attitudinal factors. (5.1.1) cites studies of well-known acclaimed experts in diverse fields as besides possessing shared attitudes exhibit cooperative and competitive attitudes towards learning. An enlightening quote from Spear and Mocker (1984) exemplifies the notion of planned and unplanned self-directed learning. Scales have been designed by researchers in the field to measure the capacity for autonomous learning. Guglielmino's (1977) identified eight factors for adult self-directed learning: (i) openness to learning opportunities, (ii) self-concept as an effective learner, (iii) initiative and independence in learning, (iv) informed acceptance of responsibility of one's learning, (v) love of learning, (vi) creativity, (vii) future orientation, and (viii) ability to use basic study and problem-solving skills. (5.1.2) starts with Cohen's quote on learning strategies and the emphasis put on the element of choice/consciousness. The distinction between direct strategies as mental processing of the target language and indirect strategies as learning supporters which involve focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy entailed in three main categories of metacognitive, social and affective are discussed. These are in fact the building blocks or components of autonomy.

Sub-title (5.2) writes on control over cognitive processing which deals with the cognitive competencies underlying behaviours like (5.2.1) attention or active mental engagement. Attention is regarded as a key process in SLA and its positive control useful. (5.2.2) is about reflection as a key psychological component of autonomy. The relationship between reflection and autonomy lies in the cognitive and behavioural process by which individuals take control. It is an internal mechanism for the development of control. Reference to Kohonen (1992) on reflection and deep learning and to Candy (1991) on deconditioning is also made.

Sub-section (5.2.3) deals with Metacognitive knowledge as a further dimension in the understanding of control over cognitive processing. Wenden (1998) describes three kinds of metacognitive knowledge: person, strategic and task knowledge of which this latter is the most relevant to the idea of control. The importance of control over cognitive processes is touched upon in (5.2.4). It is about Little's (1991) observation that autonomy presupposes that the learner 'will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning'. One of the great aspects of control over learning management is 'control over learning content' which has been dealt with in (5.3). It is concerned with the 'what' and 'why' of language learning rather than the 'when', 'where' and 'how'. Here, Macaro's (2008) point of view regarding the implications of autonomy of choice is being discussed. Also, we will see Kenny's (1993) discussion on autonomy as the expression of self. This chapter concludes in (5.4) with the heading of 'Describing the autonomous learner'. The pivotal idea has been the question of whether or not a list of components of language learner autonomy could be drawn and how many of these possible components would qualify for learner autonomy or a holistic adoption of all components would be best represent the idea. On the same note, Candy (1991) suggests autonomous learners to be:

- Methodical/disciplined
- Logical/analytical
- Reflective/self-aware
- Curious/open/motivated
- Flexible
- Interdependent/interpersonally competent
- Persistent/responsible
- Venturesome/creative
- Confident/positively self-concept oriented
- Independent/self-sufficient
- Skilled in seeking/information retrieving
- Knowledgeable and skilled in learning
- Able to develop/use evaluation criteria

What is to be careful about here is that the above list proposed by Candy only characterizes the autonomous learner and not the autonomy in learning constituted of more than 100 competencies coming from beyond the field of language education. In language education, Breen and Mann (1997) offer a more compact set of characteristics for an autonomous learner; autonomous learners, in their view, are those who:

- See their relationship to what is to be learned, to how they will learn and to the resources available as one in which they are in charge or control;
- Are in an authentic relationship to the language they are learning and have a genuine desire to learn that particular language;
- Have a robust sense of self that is unlikely to be undermined by any actual or assumed negative assessments of themselves or their work;
- Are able to step back from what they are doing and reflect upon it in a critical manner so as to make decisions for future actions;

- Are alert to change and able to change in an adaptable, resourceful and working way;
- Have a capacity to learn that is independent of the mainstream educational processes they are engaged in;
- Are able to make use of the environment they find themselves in strategically;
- Are able to negotiate between the strategic meeting of their own needs and responding to the needs and desires of other group members.

As noticed the components run along a continuum of skills to aspects of attitude and personality. Therefore autonomy may come with knowledge plus practice. It encapsulates skills, attitudes and personality in one batch. They are made up of separate constructs open to research to distinguish the ones specific to autonomous learning from those that may be simply termed as necessary for 'good' learning. To wrap up the chapter then, we are in a relatively informed vantage point to push forward an important argument. The argument being that we can describe what autonomous learners are capable of doing in terms of control over various aspects of their learning. What is difficult though is : how many aspects of learning need to be under the learner's control in order to judge the learner as autonomous? Then there is the question of control over the content and the circumstances and so on. This points to a more holistic view of learner autonomy as a broad capacity to control those aspects of learning that are particularly salient to the learner, the learner's goals and purposes, and the context of teaching and learning. The main concern remains of whether we are able to identify certain core competencies that underlie this broad capacity to control learning flexibly in response to contextual needs and constraints.

#### **Chapter (6): The conclusion to section I of the book**

Autonomy may be a good bargain in theory, but many practicing language teachers think twice before buying it. Section I of the book explores the history of the concept of autonomy, its sources beyond the field of language education, its definition and the nature of its component parts in theory. As Benson rightly points out, there are many circumstantial evidence pointing to the fact that autonomy in language learning is not "as idealistic as it may appear at first sight". While sticking to Benson's stance, we would like to emphasize that though it is not idealistic but it is by all accounts a very slippery ground to walk on. The fact that we have gone some way towards demonstrating the validity of the construct of autonomy and its role in effective language learning does not , however, mean that we have demonstrated the possibility of fostering it among learners in practice.

#### **Quote 6.1 is a suitable finale to this part**

##### **Quote 6.1**

Dickinson on the effectiveness of autonomous learning stipulates: "In recommending autonomy to learners, we are making the assumption that taking an active, independent attitude to learning and independently undertaking a learning task, is beneficial to learning; that somehow, personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning. This is not a universal view. Some teachers and

researchers either articulate or demonstrate beliefs which are in conflict with those concerning learner autonomy. Thus the claims of the desirability and effectiveness of learner autonomy need to be justified through convincing arguments".

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

Section I, "What is autonomy" outlines the origins and history of the development of autonomy in language learning, discusses various definitions of key terms, attempts to explicate why it is an increasing important issue in language education, and explores notions of control and its bearing on autonomous learning. The goal of the first section is to guide the reader through theoretical concepts and issues and branches and thus provides ample entry points for researchers to start their in-depth investigation of topics in their own specific teaching/learning situations.

Section I of "Teaching and Researching Autonomy" is a well-organized, comprehensible collection of theories and concepts suited as a reference textbook for graduate students interested in research related to autonomous learning. We enjoyed reading every single line of its thought provoking discourse leading us to the growing recognition of theories and practical applications. Benson alarms the readers about the misrepresentation of the idea of autonomy as regards the philosophy of autonomy and cautions against present-day writing on autonomy which, in his view, essentially represents a revival of interest in the idea of post-modern deconstruction of the individual self. Autonomy, today, reflects concern with the meaning and impact of language learning on students whose individuality is suppressed in modern mass educational systems.

Moreover, Benson observes that the assumption that autonomy as assumed by many to be a "good idea" and as such a part and parcel of the "language teachers' conceptual toolkit" is problematic on the one hand for it ignores wider social and ideological change and on the other hand because it reduces autonomy to a method or approach that teachers can learn and then adapt to different learners and contexts.

From a broader perspective, autonomy, has come to the educational forum as an outgrowth of specific socio-economic conditions of late capitalism. Individuals themselves have come to believe that the improvement of their lives, not only materially but psychologically too, is a matter over which they have considerable control (Cameron, 2002). A second problem is that the individuality implied in learner autonomy is being reduced to consumer choices (p. 25) and thus used in trivialized and uncritical ways which does not lead to learners taking control over their learning.

Despite the very fact that this work is a seminal contribution to the literature in autonomy and answers very many concerns and questions of practicing teachers and researchers, there exists a slight disappointment in that where Benson shares with you many of the intricate points that may escape the easy reader. Furthermore, he does not take firm sides where it is expected of him to do so by the more careful reader. He leaves you in sway. It is as if He wants to share with us the 'vertigo!' he seems to be enjoying. Nevertheless, Section I of the book puts before us

a truly stimulating and wide-ranging landmark which shows Benson's control and expertise in the field and his ability to connect autonomy with a number of disciplines from Applied Linguistics. Well done Phil, Excellent job.

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