

# Neues Lernen

New Developments in Foreign Language Learning

# Selbstgesteuert

Self-management

# Autonom

Autonomy

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GOETHE-INSTITUT 

**7** Standpunkte zur Sprach- und Kulturvermittlung

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## Learner autonomy and language switch in self-learning foreign language contexts

- How can language awareness be defined?
  - What constitutes learner autonomy in self-learning contexts?
  - How can language awareness and autonomy be promoted?
  - What is the role of language switch/the native language in these processes?
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- Wie kann Sprachbewußtsein definiert werden?
  - Was bedeutet Lernerautonomie in Selbstlern-Zusammenhängen?
  - Wie kann Sprachbewußtsein und Autonomie gefördert werden?
  - Welche Rolle spielt Sprachenwechsel/die Muttersprache in diesen Prozessen?

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the interplay of learner autonomy and language switch in the framework of adult self-learning multi-media foreign language contexts. In these contexts the learners register in a language centre but they work mainly on their own at home, sometimes miles away from the language centre. When they register, they are assigned to a tutor. They meet their tutor before they start studying to discuss issues of self-learning and autonomy and sign a contract about the work they will be undertaking. The tutor is available for group consultation and oral work at pre-determined, regular intervals – say, once a month. Otherwise, the learners will rely on multi-media learning materials as well as on help they may get from other learners or (native) speakers of the language whom they may meet in their neighbourhood, at work, at a higher learning institution etc. It goes without saying that further arrangements can also be made which allow self-learners to communicate with their assigned tutor by phone, fax or e-mail during the tutor's distant "office hours".

This self-learning multi-media context constitutes the learning/teaching framework against which learning materials for German, Spanish and Greek are being developed in the context of a LINGUA project (94-03/1514/D-VB) funded by the EU.

## 2. Setting the scene: autonomy, awareness and language learning

Researchers have defined learner autonomy in a variety of ways. However, they have usually considered it in the context of classroom language learning. See Dickinson (1987), Sheerin (1989), and Ellis and Sinclair (1989) for practical implications. Ellis and Sinclair, for instance, define learner autonomy as an attempt by the learners to: "a) become more effective learners of the L2; b) take on more responsibility for their own learning." (Ellis/Sinclair 1989, 1)

Through reflection and observation, they claim, learners can a) consider factors which may affect their language learning, such as their needs, intentions, interests and purposes in learning the language, and b) discover the learning strategies and processes that suit them best and adopt them for learning purposes. This is what Ellis and Sinclair (1989) refer to as learning to learn and learner training. Learners, however, are not only reflectors and observers of their needs, intentions, interests and purposes or of their learning strategies and processes, but they are also active participants in communicative events. Learner autonomy, therefore, should be also considered in terms of how

learners can become more effective communicators of the foreign languages they are learning. For as Barnes argues "school knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's question, to do the exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge, we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes, however, we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living". (Barnes 1976, 81) It is after using acquired knowledge that learner independence, self-reliance and self-confidence are expected to increase.

Adult learners, who are of interest to us here, know very well why they want to learn a foreign language. They can verbalize – albeit in the native language – the difficulties and the problems they face in the act of learning and of communicating. Studies have shown that reflection on language in its broader sense, as well as on the ways and means knowledge is acquired and used to fulfill certain needs, intentions, interests and purposes, can become a source and inspiration for using "school knowledge" for other more enjoyable and challenging purposes. Furthermore, reflection can uncover learners' preferences for favorite ways of language learning. It can provide learners not only with subjects to reflect on but also with tools for self-learning (cf. Skehan 1994; Schmidt 1990).

In the literature, different terms have been used to denote the concept of "reflection on language" (Cook 1991, 25) to promote language learning. Some of these are :

- Consciousness-raising: Helping the learner by drawing attention to features of the target language, especially in terms of grammar (Rutherford 1987).
- Language awareness: Helping the learner by raising awareness of language itself. Hawkins (1984), for instance, has suggested it as preliminary to L2 teaching, partly through grammar. If students know what to expect in terms of the rules of a language, they are more receptive to it. He suggested an exploratory approach.
- Sensitization: Helping the learners by alerting them to features of the first and the second language and in this way trying to ease the learning process (Riley 1985).

The above quoted definitions point out the usefulness of the native language as a point of reference. For the purposes of this paper, let me denote reflection on language with the term language awareness defined as "a person's sensitivity to and conscious perception of the nature of language and its role in human life" (Candlin 1992, xi). In this context aspects of awareness are concerned with language as form and system (cf. Carter/McCarthy 1994), culture as processes

and facts about the L2 (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1995a), learner strategies (cf. Wenden 1991), learner goals, interests and purposes (cf. Dickinson 1987) among others.

Concerning language as form and system, for instance, Carter and McCarthy (1994, 162f.) argue that there are three broad parameters of language awareness to take into account.

The first parameter refers to **form**. It involves looking at language as a system and focuses on formalistic aspects. Examples of this aspect of awareness refer to such matters as:

- Grammatical categories such as verb-endings, e.g. in English most verbs end in *-ed* in the past tense.
- Semantic distribution of adjectives, e.g. in English we can have a *strong argument* or a *powerful argument*, we can say a *powerful car* but not a *\*strong car*.
- The relationship between spelling and pronunciation, e.g. the phenomenon of [th] as (ð) and (θ) in English phonology.

The second parameter refers to **function**. It emphasizes activities designed to raise awareness of what language (verbal and non-verbal) does, particularly in communicative contexts. It involves looking at the relationship between language and context of use. Examples of this aspect of awareness are:

- Comparisons between spoken and written texts.
- Comparisons between contrasting styles designed for different purposes or functions, i. e. "real language" versus "text book language".
- Awareness of the function of phrases like *I'll let you be going then* or *This call must be costing you a lot of money* which can be used to signal a desire to terminate a phone call in English.
- Comparisons between intonation and non-verbal language and their function. Making learners notice things (by awareness-raising) is as crucial to pronunciation as it is to the teaching of other aspects of language such as grammar and vocabulary or non-verbal language. Consequently, sensitizing and awareness-raising activities are particularly important, Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) maintain, considering the communicative importance of intonation on the one hand, and its largely subliminal nature which makes it difficult to describe and teach on the other.

The third parameter of awareness-raising, Carter and McCarthy argue for, is that of socio-cultural meaning. Awareness within the parameter of **socio-cultural meaning**, they claim, is best achieved by invoking the contrastive principle. Examples of this aspect of awareness are concerned with an understanding of the implicit content that a form may contain:

- Grammatically, *oil, water, air, petrol* are all uncountable nouns in English. The form contains an implicit understanding that such a resource is limitless and unbounded. Similarly, the phrase *nuclear waste* is uncountable and singular; however, in other languages such as Spanish – *residuos radiactivos* – or Greek – *pyrinika apovlita* – the same phrase is countable and plural. The examples illustrate the interconnection between formal, functional and socio-cultural parameters with grammar and ideology closely entwined, Carter and McCarthy (1994, 163) argue. Thus, teaching about the countable /uncountable nouns as forms or contrasting styles for various purposes can also be an opportunity to integrate cultural and language awareness. This is so because culture permeates the selections we make when we use language to communicate (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1995a).
- Other examples of socio-cultural meaning are explicit versus implicit communication, politeness across cultures, gestures and their meaning, cross-cultural aspects of second/foreign language writing, etc. (Sifianou 1992; Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1995b; Connor 1996).

As stated, understanding the socio-cultural meaning of language leads to cultural awareness, which is an inherent part of the concept of language awareness. Cultural awareness comprises a) awareness of participants' own cultural values and unstated cultural assumptions, b) awareness of the problems that arise in communicating with people of other cultures and making use of appropriate communicating strategies to resolve possible problems. Cultural awareness also increases positive attitudes towards the people of other countries and cultures, thus freeing the learners from insecurity feelings and stress. It calls attention to any counterproductive stereotypes and prejudices towards people of other cultures (cf. Seelye 1984; van Lier 1995). In short, awareness of language and culture through analysis – very much sought after by adult learners who have an analytic mind – will keep the learners' developing interlanguage system open as Skehan (1994, 191) argues. See also Rogers (1994) and Selinker (1992) on this point.

In short, helping learners to develop awareness of their needs, intentions, interests and purposes in relation to their learning strategies, processes and options – linguistic, paralinguistic, extra-linguistic, and cultural to make sense of the world – is one way to learner autonomy and language learning. It seems that through awareness-raising and learner training learners can become more effective learners, sustain and speed up the learning and communicating process to the best of their ability (van Lier 1994; Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1995a).

### 3. Autonomy in self-learning contexts

In the context of adult self-learning as defined in this paper, two important questions need to be tackled: a) what constitutes autonomy in self-learning contexts, and b) how is autonomy to be promoted.

Anita Wenden in this volume discusses the "nature of the learning 'software' that learners must acquire in order to function autonomously and effectively as self-learners" (Wenden 1997, this vol., 74). She argues that strategies and knowledge comprise this learning software. These strategies constitute what Wenden calls self-management strategies or what others refer to as metacognitive strategies (Brown et al. 1982) or skills for self-directed learning (Holec 1981). The self-management strategies are: planning, monitoring and evaluating.

Planning, Wenden argues, "requires looking ahead and making decisions about what is to be learned and how best to go about it" with reference to learners' needs, intentions, interests and purposes. In other words, planning requires that learners are able to shop around and make choices from options available to them through the self-learning materials. In our case, this can be achieved through a cross-referencing and programming of learning tasks by skills, subjects, themes, topics and "can-do" statements:

Skills	Subjects	Themes	Topics	"Can-do" statements
reading	grammar	personal	meeting people	talking about oneself
listening	vocabulary	general		
speaking	discourse	social		
writing		cultural		
translating		professional		
etc.	etc.	etc.	etc.	etc.

Self-learning materials should incorporate clear objectives if learners are to be able to make decisions about which modules and which individual tasks, or activities, exercises etc. they should choose to do and how they should tackle them. We chose not a note-taking or statement form, as is usually the case, but



a Q-A form. Through Q-A interactive sequences learners will be required to decide which modules, tasks etc. they find more useful, interesting or motivating for themselves, how they can go about them and what the learning outcomes will be.

Objectives can be defined in terms of three types of orientation: entry, process and output orientation objectives.

*Entry orientation objectives* specify what learners ought to expect to learn, should they choose to do a particular module or task, etc. Objectives for entry orientation incorporate what Wenden calls task knowledge to a great extent.

*Process orientation objectives* refer to how learners can tackle the module or the individual task(s). Process orientation incorporates person knowledge as defined by Wenden. It is also related to monitoring which is the second self-management strategy and the entry point to the learning process (Wenden 1997; also Dickinson 1997). Learners need to observe and reflect on their learning and communication processes in order to a) note difficulties and problems they face, b) identify the cause, and c) take appropriate action choosing among possible options available so they can restore the learning and communication process. Processing strategies, also called cognitive or learning strategies (cf. Wenden 1991; Chamot/O' Malley 1990; Oxford 1990; also Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1987) constitute mental actions (e.g. learners categorize, make assumptions etc.) often accompanied by an overt behaviour (e.g. learners underline key words or discourse cohesion features; learners ask their interlocutor(s) for a clarification or repetition; learners consult a dictionary etc.) Often processing strategies may be specific to skills and tasks, but the skills acquired are transferable from task to task. The process orientation objectives will guide learners through the strategies and processes required to handle learning and communicating. Self-learning materials may include pre-task, while-task or post-task activities leading to awareness of processing syntax, lexis, culture or discourse features of the language and how they interrelate linguistically and culturally to make sense of the world. See Rampillon (1997) for a sample of useful activities.

*Output orientation objectives* can be defined as what learners are expected to have learned after finishing the specific module or task etc. they have chosen to do. Output orientation is related to evaluating and evaluating strategies (Wenden 1997; Dickinson 1997). Evaluating strategies will allow learners to compare and contrast real output of tasks (i.e. their view of the world) with the expected output spelled out in learning materials, often manifested in the form of the answer key. By doing so, learners often discover their own strengths and weaknesses both in terms of knowledge (i.e. how much they know about certain aspects of grammar, or of culture) and processing options (i.e. what strategies and processes they made use of to carry out an action or task). By comparing

their options with those suggested in learning materials, learners may not only discover their weaknesses – often due to cognitive interference – but they may also become aware that other options may lead to similar outputs. Thus they increase their own repertoire of processing options as well as their flexibility in language learning and communicating (cf. Lockhart/Richards 1994, 63–65).

However, as research cited above indicates, entry, process and output orientation as awareness-raising and learner training require that learners can handle appropriate metalanguage, metacognition and metacommunication. Learner metalanguage, however, is never enough to cope with efficiently in the L2 (Little/Singleton 1992; also Papaefthymiou-Lytra, forthcoming). If teachers and learners alike often use the L1 to get things done and gain time and effort in the classroom situation (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1990; Harbord 1992), how are learners going to cope in self-learning contexts?

#### 4. Autonomy, self-learning contexts and language switch

In self-learning contexts there is no teacher available on a regular basis as in the classroom context, where the aim of learner training is to increase learner responsibility, independence and self-confidence. In self-learning contexts learner responsibility, independence, control and self-assessment are a prerequisite for learners to function. Learners are constantly required to take initiative and assess the results. However, learners also need some external feedback to confirm accuracy and appropriateness issues or to fill in gaps of background knowledge. In a classroom situation external feedback is usually provided by the teacher or other fellow learner(s).

As I have argued in Papaefthymiou-Lytra (forthcoming), in self-learning contexts learners are expected to play a variety of roles; replacing the teacher is one of them. As research indicates, those roles are usually demonstrated through the interplay of language switch. In the framework of guest vs. host languages (cf. Bhatia/Ritchie 1989) a variety of factors, social, affective, personal, language, cultural, cognitive among others, prompt language switch in self-learning multi-media FL contexts. See Papaefthymiou-Lytra (forthcoming) for a detailed discussion. Adult learners consider language switch an asset to awareness-raising and self-learning processes. In practical terms, they stress the need to have recourse to bilingual sources, i.e. dictionaries, reference grammars, instructions, explanations, etc. to help them solve problems of comprehension, interpretation and production. Furthermore, they also feel that comparisons between the L1 and L2, at the level of verbal and non-verbal behaviours, increase their awareness and minimize errors in production and

interpretation (cf. Little/Singleton 1992; Schmidt 1990; Rubin/Thompson 1982). This bilingual approach is in accord with Blum-Kulka and Sheffer's (1993) findings. On discussing metapragmatic discourse awareness of American-Israeli families at dinner, the writers state that metapragmatic comments were carried out in a multilingual fashion. There were either explanations in the language the query was made or explanations and translation equivalents in the other language. Similarly, Collingham, challenging the S/FL-only principle in adult FL learning, states: "To treat adult learners as if they know nothing of language is to accept the imbalance of power and so ultimately to collude with institutional racism; to adopt a bilingual approach and to value the knowledge that learners already have is to begin to challenge the unequal power relationship and, one hopes, thereby enable learners to acquire the skills and confidence they need to claim back more power for themselves in the world beyond the classroom." (Collingham 1988, 85)

Of course, dependence on the L1 decreases over time as proficiency develops (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra, forthcoming; also Auerbach 1995).

In self-learning contexts the role of the L1 through language switch can carry an important significance for adult learners. It can represent the authoritative voice of the teacher, of a user-friendly consultant and advisor or of a fellow learner to interact with. It can provide learners with important background knowledge concerning the language, the country, the culture and the people. Learners in self-learning FL contexts consider language switch of importance regardless of their L2 language abilities. Language switch, research indicates, increases learner awareness and independence; it helps learners to get over language and culture shock. Furthermore, language switch and awareness of L1 and L2 cognitive schemata, pragmatic and discourse organization differences, etc. can allow learners to combat cognitive interference and enhance their monitoring power (cf. Odlin 1990, 1994; also Papaefthymiou-Lytra, forthcoming).

In short, language switch can be used in entry, process and output orientation to alleviate the problem of having to carry out metalinguistic and metacognitive communication entirely in the L2. Often the level of language in learner training materials can be more difficult from or more complicated than the actual language learning materials. Learners tend to skip learner training activities or tasks all together, unless they are frequently reminded of the importance of learner training. Learner training materials must be user-friendly for learners to benefit from them. Language switch can be an easy and useful way of rendering them accessible to learners. It can save time and trouble. Language switch can increase positive attitudes and decrease negative attitudes and stress. In short, it seems that the interplay of language switch in learner training materials facilitates awareness-raising, learner self-assessment

and enhances learner motivation and self-confidence. Besides, language switch can help develop learners' inter-cultural awareness and flexibility in using the language.

These arguments notwithstanding, it is part of the philosophy of the self-learning systems we are working on that learners are encouraged to collaborate with other language learners or seek advice from (native) speakers of the language. Language switch, however, is an inseparable part of foreign language learning and communicating, inside and outside the classroom. L2 learners usually seek recourse in the L1 when they face problems while communicating in the L2 (cf. Bongaerts/Poulisse, 1994). Monolingual learners tend to switch to their L1 for metalinguistic communication (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1990). (Native) speakers, who can communicate both in the L1 and L2 of the learners, also tend to use the L1 of the learners rather than the L2 – which is their own L1 (cf. Burt 1992). It goes without saying that language switch may also take place during contact hours with the tutor.

## 5. Conclusion

Pertinent to learners' autonomy is an awareness of how learners learn best and how they can communicate, in other words, what learning and communicating strategies they prefer and what kinds of methods suit their learning mode best in order to fulfill their aims and purposes. In order to increase autonomy and independence in self-learning materials it is important that we promote learner training through language awareness. Language awareness, however, presupposes use of metalanguage, metacognition, metacommunication and the need for an awareness of L1/L2 contrasts. It seems, therefore, that a wise and skillful exploitation of language switch has an important role to play in promoting learning how to learn, autonomy and self-learning attitudes as well as motivation and learning and communicating processes.

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