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ONLINE RESOURCES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

Oktavia Widiastuti
State Polytechnic of Malang

ABSTRACT

There is a perceived relationship between technology and learner autonomy in the language teaching community. Students become increasingly empowered when using technology as they develop self-discipline and confidence through increased responsibility for their own learning processes. For language learning, computers offer rich volumes of text, pictures, sound, and video, they are also interactive, available at any time and place for individual or collective learners. It also facilitates learner autonomy, which is understood as the learner's learning capacity displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts. It involves the learner, teacher, materials, learning context, and what students want in an online environment.

Online learning offers many opportunities for students. Some research results showed that the students responded positively to this means of communication. The students' way of learning interaction is enriched through the computerized media. Furthermore, it can enhance their learning as it strengthens their understanding toward the language they learn and their self study, meaning that it makes this type of language learners more motivated than the non-autonomous ones. At present, however, there is a great need for research that focuses on the relationship between particular forms of practice and the development of autonomy to support the theoretical assumptions.

Keywords: *learner autonomy, online resources, learning process, self-study*

There is a perceived relationship between technology and learner autonomy in the language teaching community. Learner empowerment is a prominent feature of integrating the technology of online resources in a foreign language curriculum. Students are seen as becoming increasingly empowered when using such technology because they develop self-discipline and confidence through increased responsibility for their own learning processes (Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts, 1994). Benson and Voller (1997) discussed these issues stating that "Computer software for language learning is an example of a technology which claims to promote autonomy simply by offering the possibility of self-study. Such claims are often dubious because of the limited range of options and roles offered to the learner". Benson and Voller go on to argue that all educational technologies including the textbook and the computer can be perceived to be more or less supportive of autonomy.

Computers have often been viewed as the perfect independent learning tool rather than simply a part of the autonomy/independence bigger picture. Why is that, and can technology really offer learners something unobtainable by other means? It could be argued that online resources are the ultimate engine for language learning. They offer volumes of text, pictures, sound, and video. They are also interactive and increasingly offer readymade self-access materials available at any time and place for individual or collective learners.

DEFINING LEARNER AUTONOMY

Autonomy has been described as "a *capacity* - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts" (Little, 1991, p. 4). When the

instructor's role is examined within a certain educational setting, it would indicate whether a particular teacher tends to control the behavior of students or support their autonomy (Deci et al., 1981). Some other terms such as 'self-access,' 'independent learning,' 'open,' 'distance,' and 'flexible' learning have often been used to describe similar activities in which the teacher has more or less input in what goes on in the classroom. (The bottom line in all these uses is that teachers are encouraged to turn some power over to the learners and simultaneously take such roles as bystander, facilitator, guide, or helper.) One should be cautious, however, not to assume that all individuals are equally receptive to the notions of autonomous/independent learning.

THE LEARNER AUTONOMY PICTURE

There are four players in the learner autonomy picture: the learner, the teacher, the materials, and learning the context. Here is a look at each one of them in detail.

1. The Learner

Obviously, autonomous learners are perceived to possess unique characteristics that make them independent, self-efficient, and willing to take the risk and responsibility of relying more on themselves than on others. Dickinson (1993) identifies five characteristics of independent learners:

1. *they understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices;*
2. *they are able to formulate their own learning objectives;*
3. *they are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies;*
4. *they are able to monitor their use of these strategies;*
5. *they are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning* (*Dickinson, 1993, pp. 330-31).*

2. The Teacher

A variety of new roles have been proposed for teachers to play in autonomous or independent learning. These roles include bystander, facilitator, guide, helper, counselor, and mentor. For example, an activity in which the instructor's role is to monitor the students' activities in pairs or small groups discreetly could be introduced to encourage learner autonomy. In such case, intervention is unnecessary unless learners need assistance. However, some teachers find these changes to be challenging and do not necessarily accept these new ideas easily. This is also a mistake that is commonly made in materials design for independent learning.

3. The Materials

Designing suitable materials for the autonomous learner can be a challenge. Motteram (1997) wrote about the many years teachers spend developing materials for their classrooms and adapting their teaching styles to that environment. He wrote that when teachers switch to an independent learning environment, they might expect the immediate transferability of the previous skills to the new learner-centered environment. This never happens because the nature of independent learning materials is different. Consequently, teachers may feel threatened that they have lost the value of their hard earned skills. Motteram added that many learners will feel cheated if they find that the material they are presented with in a so-called independent learning environment is the same as that presented in a regular class.

4. Learning the Context

Individuals are unique and their uniqueness should be emphasized because of their sociocultural background and the significance of allowing social reality to be a part of classroom teaching and learning. Social reality is not stable and because learners influence it, teachers cannot teach everything about a language. Learners influence the social context and the language in turn, or at least its use. For this reason, learners become more important members of a classroom. Therefore, classroom learning should take learners' backgrounds into account in order to provide a meaningful and stimulating learning environment. This view of social reality is consistent with the constructivist movement in cognitive psychology, which shows that individuals gradually build their own

understanding of the world through experience and maturation (Bruner, 1986).

Benson (1997, p.1-2) notes that the term *learner autonomy* can have at least five different connotations:

a. *for situations in which learners study entirely on their own*
b. *for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning*
c. *for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education*
d. *for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning*
e. *for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning (Benson, 1997, pp. 1-2).*

We often hear the term *self-direction* in connection with learner autonomy. This term refers to the type of learning that occurs when the learner makes a decision regarding the setting and content of the learned subject matter. While this could happen unconsciously, other learners consider self-directed learning as a conscious form of learning, thereby equating it with autonomous learning (Hammond & Collins, 1991). In sum, autonomy is a social construct that includes the ability to function effectively as a cooperative member in a group. Learning takes place in a social context and it is this context that learners have to be aware of and assume a role in.

5. What students want in an online environment?

The idea of a learner-centered environment is still unfamiliar to many students who grew up in a teacher-centered classroom. Asking those students to suddenly shift to a new setting that is totally or partially electronic might lead to a shock and great resistance. In order to ensure a smooth transition to a new reality, students should be asked what they want in the new environment. If adapting to a technologically enhanced classroom is inevitable in this era, researchers, curriculum designers, administrators, and teachers should obtain the students' feedback on what features of online resources appeal to them and are most helpful in their education. In addition, we know very little about how students actually use online resources. Students may not use the resources in the ways that the teachers had envisioned.

THE ADVANTAGES OF USING ONLINE RESOURCES AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL IN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

Much of the published research on this topic shows that the advantages of using online resources as an educational tool far outweigh the disadvantages. Several researchers have mentioned many advantages. For example, according to Berge and Collins (1995), many opportunities are offered through online learning for such endeavors as course management, information retrieval, peer review, project-based instruction, personal networking, mentoring/tutoring, interactive chat, professional growth, and experience in using modern technology. Berge and Collins added that by writing online for an authentic purpose, students are motivated to communicate with a broader audience than what they are used to- the classroom. In addition, the digital revolution of the late 20th and early 21st has shifted the focus in the classroom from the teacher to the learner. In the new environment students are helped through online learning to find the necessary resources to carry on their learning outside the classroom and thus become lifelong learners.

Interaction was also discussed by many researchers. For example, Vilmi (1995) said that cultural awareness among students in different parts of the world is enhanced by the opportunities for interaction offered by online resources. Moreover, in searching for and retrieving information online, students have greater interaction with the course materials, providing them with a sense of ownership (Shetzer, 1995), as well as enjoyment of the course content (Opp-Beckman, 1995). In discussing the interaction of text and context, Kramsch and Andersen (1999, p. 31) said that using multimedia technology in teaching languages presents a double challenge for learners to observe and select "culturally relevant features of the context" and put linguistic features in context to understand language in use. The kinds of reflectiveness and interactivity that are mediated through asynchronous conferencing have also been researched. Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) concluded in their study of French learners that such an environment has "created the possibility for learners to interact with each

other and with teachers and native speakers--thus providing opportunities for practice and intrinsic feedback" (p. 43). Lamy and Goodfellow go on to argue that conscious reflection is still necessary even in such an interactive learning environment and that it should be combined with spontaneous interaction. In another study about computer mediated communication, Blake (2000), in a study on L2 Spanish interlanguage, found that "CMC can provide many of the alleged benefits ascribed to the Interaction Hypothesis" (p. 120), which states that the conditions for SLA are crucially enhanced by having L2 learners negotiate meaning (i.e., resolve their miscommunications) with other speakers, native or otherwise Long & Robinson, 1998), but with more possibilities for access out of the classroom. Blake added that "incidental negotiations commonly occurred in networked learner/learner discussions as well, especially with respect to their lexical confusions" (p.120). Blake's study showed "the value of synchronous chat records as a window for investigating interlanguage" (p.120).

Computer-assisted classroom discussion using networked computers was the topic of Healy Beauvois' (1992) dissertation. In her study, she explored the "interaction intermediate French students using a Local Area Network (LAN) for synchronous classroom discussion in French" (p. v). The findings suggested that student contributions in French fit "sound language learning pedagogy" where code switching and teacher intervention instances were low, whereas discourse was high in both quantity and quality, and students responded positively to this means of communication. Moreover, the effects of the communication context of synchronous interaction tools, such as Web chat between English non-native and English native speakers, on the process of acquiring a second language was studied by Negretti (1999). The main purpose of the author was to discover "patterns and conversational strategies used by participants in this on-line context" as well as "the machinery and the structure of social action in language". The study also analyzed whether Web chat implied a "reduction of the range in interactional practices, actions performance, sense making, and meaning negotiation, thus affecting the SLA process". The analysis focused on "the overall structure of interaction and sequence organization in connection with the on-line communication setting features". It then passed to "turn-taking organization, with attention to recurrent structures and patterns as in openings and closings; turn design (or packaging of actions); expression of paralinguistic features in this on-line context; and some (interlanguage) pragmatic variables".

Computer-mediated communication was also studied by Sengupta (2001) who stated that it can be "a powerful tool towards literacy development as its text-based nature supports sustained reflection on classroom exchanges". Sengupta's described how students completing a BA in Contemporary English Language used "the available technology to interact with peers and their comment on how this mode of delivery extended their traditional notions of learning". Sengupta's data showed that the students were personally accountable due to their elevated exposure online- an issue viewed as an exceptional but intimidating part of this approach. This study evaluated how powerful online exposure can be in showcasing the students' experiences and comments. Collaborative Internet projects were studied by the EFL study of Braunstein et al. (2000). It was found that those projects provided "students with opportunities for completing authentic reading and writing tasks, for learning about other cultures, and for developing useful technical skills". In a paper examining "the two tenets of communicative language teaching--authenticity of the input and authorship of the language user--in an electronic environment", Kramsch et al. (2000) concluded, in their study of Spanish and English, that "a communicative approach based on the use of authentic texts and on the desire to make the learners author their own words has been changed by the physical properties of the electronic medium and the students' engagement with it".

Learner empowerment is another feature of integrating online resources in a foreign language curriculum. Students become empowered as they develop self-discipline and confidence by being more responsible for their own learning processes (Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts, 1994). In addition, students are

judged by their production, not what their appearance or how they sound, thus making them more confident when communicating in the target language. Online learning can provide students with new, exciting, and challenging resources (Barron and Ivers, 1998). It creates opportunities for multicultural education, establishes authentic learning experiences, supports higher-order thinking skills, improves writing skills, and boosts motivation, achievement, and positive behavior. Reading and writing skills are promoted through electronic discussion lists, email keypals, and projects online by providing an authentic audience for students' writing (Gaer, 1999). In addition to having the flexibility to be used with students at any grade level and any proficiency level, these projects also help students develop computer literacy and online skills as they use the computer for authentic purposes. Online resources also provide an excellent language learning environment especially for the autonomous learner. This environment was described in Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) and it listed eight conditions including opportunities interaction with an authentic audience to perform authentic tasks, encouraging learners to be creative, providing enough time and feedback for learners, guiding learners to be fully attentive during the learning process, having an ideal level of stress and anxiety, and supporting learner autonomy.

THE DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE RESOURCES AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL IN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

As with any teaching tool, along with the benefits come some drawbacks as well. A challenge facing teachers is the time requirements in learning new ways to give feedback online, teaching software programs to students (Opp-Beckman, 1995), and facilitating and participating in online projects which are just getting started (Vilmi, 1995). Shetzer (1995) also warned that the interaction between the student and text (or computer) might overwhelm that among students themselves. Learning and teaching online require great tolerance of ambiguity and even of chaos (Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts, 1994). In addition, students with low proficiency in keyboarding, reading and writing might find it difficult to remain motivated, perceiving the virtual classroom as a hindrance to learning more than a benefit (Hiltz, 1990). Learning online was not designed to be, and is not, a complete language learning tool; it is merely one of many ways that we can learn and practice a foreign language. In particular, the material available on the Internet, with the exception of material produced for language learners, is not graded. Beginning students can easily be overwhelmed with the rich vocabulary and colloquial expressions that they find there. It is therefore an important task for instructors to guide students to material that not only is of interest to them, but also manageable at their current level of language proficiency. Using online resources is not one thing with narrow, uniform, and readily predictable outcomes. In practice, it is many things with many possible outcomes for different students. Furthermore, even a single category of using online resources, such as using them as an information archive, can produce tremendous variation in likely consequences. Schofield and Davidson (2002) looked at six kinds of outcomes of use of online resources that students experienced:

enhanced enjoyment and motivation, a better understanding of both computing and the Internet, a greater ability to produce work of quality, more access to career information and opportunities, exposure to a broader range of perspectives and experiences, and improved reading skills in both English and foreign languages (Schofield and Davidson 2002, p. 209).

As a result of the widespread effects of technology throughout the world, college-level educators are being challenged to rethink and revise their approaches and goals in teaching in order to effectively prepare students for what will be expected of them in the real world. Black et al. (1995) summarized the importance of using computers as educational tools because students like working on them and are motivated by the use of real data and the fact that this is a skill they will need in the future. Because the way in which we retrieve and interpret information is changing and evolving, so must the education which prepares students to successfully accomplish these tasks.

THE EDUCATIONAL APPLICATIONS OF ONLINE RESOURCES IN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS: COMMUNICATION AND RESEARCH

According to Barron and Ivers (1998), the educational applications of online resources can be divided into two very broad areas: communication and research. The communication category includes asynchronous communications such as e-mail and electronic publishing, and synchronous communications such as chat rooms, audio conferencing, and video conferencing.

The research category includes basic, advanced, and original research. Basic research involves finding, comparing, and reporting facts from one or more preselected sources. Advanced research includes a wider variety of sources such as several online sites in addition to print or CD-ROM sources. Another difference is that the sources are not preselected. Original research can be done using surveys and collaborative experiments.

After the information is compiled, it can be graphed, analyzed, and reported. Online resources can connect the teaching and learning of languages as described in Shetzer and Warschauer (2001) who wrote that learners should be taught the type of language that they would eventually use and that the language learners motivation increases if there is informational content being taught. They added that in order for teaching to be effective, prior knowledge, existing knowledge, the total academic environment, and learners' linguistic proficiencies should be taken into consideration and that that contextualized language use should be the focus of language teaching. Finally, they wrote that what benefits learners most is a focus on significant and relevant content.

LANGUAGE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD AND PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE RESOURCES

As to the attitudes of L2 learners toward the use of technology, Yang (2001), in a study about EFL students, reported that the experience was generally positive for learners. On the other hand, negative attitudes had to do with technical difficulties and information overload. Yang also reported that using online resources often stimulated incidental learning and that seeking information online triggered both anxiety and excitement in learners at the same time. In concluding the study, Yang stated that computer networks could empower students especially in well-designed language learning environments and that providing scaffolding to guide learners in using online applications and orient them to the task is essential for the success in implementing and integrating technology into the curriculum. Researchers also studied student perceptions. In an important article, Stepp-Greany (2002) presented survey data from beginning Spanish classes using a combination of technologies: Internet activities, CD-ROM, electronic pen pals, and threaded discussions. Goals of the study were to determine students' perceptions of (a) the role and importance of the instructor in technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), (b) the accessibility and relevance of the lab and the individual technological components in student learning, and (c) the effects of the technology on the foreign language learning experiences. Students attributed an important role to instructors and perceived that cultural knowledge, listening and reading skills, and independent learning skills were enhanced but were divided in their perceptions about the learning or interest values of the individual components.

In addition, Kung and Chuo (2002) investigated the potential role of ESL/EFL Web sites as a means to supplement in-class instruction. They evaluated a program in which forty-nine students enrolled in a high-beginner EFL class were introduced to five Web sites and instructed to use them for a homework assignment and for self-study. The data revealed that despite some difficulties encountered, students had an overall positive attitude to using the teacher-selected Web sites in their learning of English. The students found that learning English through ESL/EFL Web sites was interesting and that the teaching strategies used by the teachers were effective and necessary.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN USING ONLINE RESOURCES AND ENHANCING THE LEARNING OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

Many researchers have studied the relationship between using online resources and enhancing the learning of language skills. This line of research has established a high correlation between using this technology in the language classroom and high achievement in language proficiency. In the reading comprehension area, for example, Lomicka (1998) wrote about "how computerized reading with full glossing may promote a deeper level of text comprehension" (p. 41) for students of French. Moreover, reading comprehension practice and production practice in Japanese were studied by Nagata (1998) who investigated input versus output practice in educational software for second language acquisition. In addition, De Ridder (2002) found that when reading a text with highlighted hyperlinks, her subjects, native Dutch speakers learning French, were *significantly more willing to consult the gloss. However, this increased clicking does not slow down the reading process, does not affect text comprehension, and does not increase the vocabulary learned incidentally. The reading task does not seem to alter the clicking behavior of the students but seems to influence the reader's vocabulary learning: A content-oriented reading task decreases the reader's attention for vocabulary (De Ridder, 2002, p. 123).*

With regard to grammar, Collentine (2000), studying foreign-language learners of Spanish, demonstrated "how computer-assisted language learning (CALL) software containing user-behavior tracking technologies can provide important insights into the construction of grammatical knowledge" (p. 44). This satisfies the constructivist premises that are increasingly compelling teachers to employ exploratory and inductive tasks, stipulating that students should be "agents" who manufacture rather than receive knowledge. Sotillo (2000) investigated "discourse functions and syntactic complexity in ESL learner output obtained via two different modes of computer mediated communication: asynchronous and synchronous discussions" (p. 82). The results showed that *asynchronous and synchronous CMC have different discourse features which may be exploited for different pedagogical purposes. In the hands of experienced teachers, both modes of CMC can be used as novel tools to enhance the language acquisition process by encouraging interaction among participants, collaborative text construction, and the formation of electronic communities of learners (Sotillo, 2000, p. 82).*

Hoven (1999) proposed an "instructional design model appropriate for humanistic multimedia Computer-Enhanced Language Learning (CELL) in a self-access environment for second language learning through listening and viewing comprehension" (p. 88). Hoven's model was "grounded in sociocultural theory, and set against a background of research into the complexities of listening and viewing, individual learner differences and learning styles, characteristics of self-directed and autonomous learning, and user-friendly instructional software design" (ibid.). Several researchers also highlighted the use of e-mail to promote foreign language learning in general and the writing skill in particular. When compared with oral production, L2 use generated through the electronic medium has several features according to González-Bueno (1998), who studied Spanish students. Those features are: "(a) greater amount of language; (b) more variety of topics and language functions; (c) higher level of language accuracy; (d) more student-initiated interactions; and (e) more personal and expressive language use" (p. 55). However, Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2001) questioned the potential of electronic mail writing in improving academic writing abilities for ESL students because email engenders features of both the written and spoken forms of the language. In a comparative study, there were no obvious differences found between students' electronic mail and word-processed writing. However, the electronic mail texts were significantly shorter than the word-processed texts, and text-initial contextualization was more prominent in the word-processed than in the electronic mail texts. (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001). Other researchers were interested in investigating how the online resources would help in teaching culture. Osuna and Meskill (1998), for instance, concluded that the online environment was a suitable tool to increase language and cultural knowledge of Spanish, as well as a means to increase motivation.

Furstenberg et al. (2001) presented a "Web-based, cross-cultural, curricular initiative entitled *Cultura* designed to develop foreign language students' understanding of foreign cultural attitudes, concepts, beliefs, and ways of interacting and looking at the world" (p. 55). The participants were French and American students, and the focus was on the "pedagogy of electronic media, with particular emphasis on the ways in which the Web can be used to reveal those invisible aspects of a foreign culture, thereby giving a voice to the elusive *silent language* and empowering students to construct their own approach to cross-cultural literacy" (ibid.). In another culture-related study, Müller-Hartmann (2000) compared three email projects between EFL high school classes in Germany, and English and Social Studies classes in the United States and Canada. The researcher concluded that:

A comparison between intercultural learning in the actual reading process and the negotiation of meaning in the network phases shows a close resemblance in the structure and use of tasks. Task properties, such as activity, setting, and teacher and learner roles, as well as the personal level (i.e., non-thematic exchange of information) in the asynchronous e-mail exchange, proved to be especially influential for intercultural learning in the design and management of task structure (Müller-Hartmann, 2000, p. 129).

In testing, Roever (2001) argued that "Web-based language tests were most appropriate in low-stakes testing situations; but with proper supervision, they can also be used in medium-stakes situations although they are not generally recommended for high-stakes situations" (p. 84). Perez Fernandez (2000) examined how the use of the World Wide Web (WWW) as a tool may change the contents as well as the teaching procedures and the material covered. In class he used the WWW as a source of authentic material for the study of English in the field of psychology. His students had "access to current online material, and they can work with such diverse web sites as departments of psychology web sites, on-line atlases of the brain, resource web sites, career orientation and professional information web sites, etc." (p. 257). He reported that the students became proficient in English and acquainted with vocabulary related to their main discipline, i.e. psychology. Perez Fernandez reported that the result was more dynamic approach to teaching English, so that the students gain autonomy, with the instructor acting only as coordinator, supervisor and tutor.

In another study on English for construction, Perez Fernandez (2001), studied the potential of the WWW to expand the possibilities of language teaching, particularly in the field of specific content areas, like engineering, architecture or the construction industry. He found that the Web facilitated "easy, instantaneous access to sources of information, specialized texts and data that were either unavailable in the past or took a considerable amount of time to access" (p. 119). He suggested that "in addition to providing these specific texts that can be used as teaching and practice material, and serving as an electronic board with information on classes, deadlines, contents, syllabus, etc., the WWW should also affect the way languages are taught, as well as the learning styles of the students" (ibid.). Perez Fernandez concluded that because online resources are being increasingly used as a teaching resource, "we should move from a phase of simply using the new media with the old content, on to developing not only new contents but also new teaching procedures and strategies based on these new media".

This line of research still has a number of open questions about how to optimally utilize this modern technology and incorporate it into foreign language programs. LoCastro (2001), for example, recommended that this area especially needed more qualitative or multi-dimensional research learn more about learners' perceptions of the incorporation of online resources. She further suggested that future studies focus on individual learners' accounts without interference from the researcher. Moreover, Stepp-Greany (2002) concluded that more research is needed on student perceptions of multimedia instruction and the teacher's role in such environments. It is also hoped that further research in this topic confirms the prediction that foreign language learners exposed to this learning tool would become lifelong learners of the foreign language beyond the classroom context (González- Bueno, 1998).

FOSTERING AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH USING ONLINE RESOURCES

Technology-based approaches to autonomy development are similar in many areas to other resource-based approaches, but can be differentiated from them through their focus on the technologies used to access resources (Benson, 2001). As Motteram (1997) points out, new learning technologies have a long association with autonomy. Many technology-based projects have been reported incorporating student-produced video (Gardner, 1994), computer-enhanced interactive video (Gardner and Blasco-Garcia, 1996), electronic writing environments (Milton, 1997), concordancing (Aston, 1997), hypermedia systems (Mayes, 1994), e-mail language advising (Makin, 1994), and computer simulations (Mak, 1994). In these projects it is either the interaction with the technology itself or the potential of the technology to facilitate interactions that is seen to be supportive of autonomy. Since the establishment of learner autonomy research, a number of misconceptions have occurred. Benson (2001) summarized these misunderstandings in two points. First, learner autonomy is not the same as self-instruction as the latter often fails to provide successful results.

Second, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher yields all his/her authority to the students. A major influence on learner autonomy is the work of Vygotsky. The central term in his theory is the *zone of proximal development*, defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). Benson (2001) summed up the importance of Vygotsky's theory in studying learner autonomy by stating the importance of social interaction and collaboration in the learning process, which means using alternative learning environments that are not teacher-centered and that encourage student collaboration and interaction. Thus, external social interaction and internal cognitive interaction become inseparable and mutually influential.

This way, the learning environment is broadened and now includes the learner's responsibility for his or her own learning process as well as that of peers. Autonomy has been described as a *capacity* - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action (Little, 1991). The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little, 1991, p. 4). Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) listed eight conditions that, when present in the language learning environment in some form and in some amount, seem to support optimal classroom language learning. Not surprisingly, supporting learner autonomy was one of those conditions.

In general, autonomous learners are more highly motivated than nonautonomous learners. In other words, autonomy leads to better, more effective work. The literature has provided evidence that learning autonomy increases motivation and consequently increases learning effectiveness. Knowles (1975), for instance, reported that "there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners). They enter into learning more purposefully and with great motivation," (Knowles, 1975, p. 14). In addition, Wang and Peverly (1986) reviewed findings of strategy research (in subjects other than language learning) and concluded that independent or autonomous learners were those who had the capacity for being active and independent in the learning process; they were able to identify goals, formulate their own learning strategies, and monitor their own learning. The advantages of learner autonomy can be summarized in three points according to Dickinson (1995): learning is more focused, purposeful, and effective; there are no barriers between learning and living; and learners are able to transfer their autonomous behavior to other areas of their lives.

CONCLUSION

There is a great need for research that focuses on the relationship between particular forms of

practice and the development of autonomy. The most pressing need is for empirical research that will support or undermine the theoretical assumptions on which forms of practice are based (Benson, 2001). There is also a gap in the literature in the areas of students' self-perception as autonomous learners, the value of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous learner, and the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner.

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