

Responding to the challenge of student diversity: Learner autonomy and constructive alignment

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1. Introduction

There's nothing new about diversity. Teachers at all levels of education have always had to cope with individual differences among their learners – differences of personality, cognitive style, attitude, belief and motivation. These individual differences, together with differences of previous educational experience and achievement, ensure that any seemingly homogeneous group of learners is in fact a mixed-ability class. In recent years, migration and student mobility have added linguistic diversity to the mix. Increasing numbers of learners at all levels of education receive and are expected to process curriculum content in a language that is not the one they use at home. Especially in larger cities, linguistic diversity in the school-going population often takes an extreme form. I am currently working with a primary school in one of Dublin's western suburbs, for example, where almost 80 per cent of the 320 pupils start school with little or no English and speak one of about 50 different languages at home. Linguistic diversity is usually accompanied by cultural diversity, and that brings with it great variability as regards beliefs about education and expectations about teaching and learning. And as if all this weren't enough, we now have to contend with the rapid growth of English-medium degree programmes at universities in non-English-speaking countries.

I believe that our most appropriate response to all forms of student diversity is differentiation, which means organising programmes of study in ways that explicitly accommodate learners' individual needs, abilities, interests and aspirations. Differentiation requires us to create a dynamic of

teaching and learning that fosters the autonomy of the individual student as a fully integrated member of a collaborative learning community. In their mission statements universities often claim that their style of teaching produces graduates whose learning experience prepares them to meet whatever challenges life may throw at them. In reality, however, the efforts of individual university teachers to promote autonomous and collaborative learning all too often receive scant institutional support. That is where constructive alignment comes in. If we want to respond to the challenges of diversity by differentiation, we need to develop approaches to teaching and learning that explicitly promote student autonomy. But in order to do that effectively, the content, delivery and assessment of our courses need to be “constructively aligned” with one another.

The first part of this article is concerned with learner autonomy in theory and practice. I begin by summarising the two rather different views of learner autonomy that emerged from the Council of Europe’s work in the 1970s. The first was central to the project entitled “The organisation, content and methods of adult education”, the final report of which appeared in 1977, while the second was elaborated by Henri Holec in his report *Autonomy and foreign language learning*, published by the Council of Europe in 1979; both views are present in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). I then consider an approach to learner autonomy that embodies both views and refer briefly to its successful implementation in four very different language learning environments. The second part of the article summarises the principles on which the constructive alignment of curriculum, teaching/learning and assessment is based, points out that the CEFR is, among other things, an instrument of constructive alignment, and proposes five steps that enable us to move from theory to practice in the design and implementation of language programmes at university.

2. *Learner autonomy*

2.1 *The contribution of the Council of Europe*

Henri Holec was the first person to apply the concept of learner autonomy to foreign language learning, in his 1979 report (cited here as Holec 1981). But Holec didn’t invent the concept, which already played a major role in theories of adult education and strongly influenced the Council of Europe’s project “The organisation, content and methods of adult education”. The

dual university teachers and to the institutions in which they work. The literature on learner autonomy and constructive alignment suggests, however, that the effort can bring rich rewards.

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