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Is self-assessment the missing link in the autonomy conundrum?

Peer- and self-assessment of writing and speaking skills in EFL higher education

1. The assessment-autonomy link

The relationship between autonomy and assessment has recently come under the spotlight, due to the development of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), with its promotion of reflection and evaluation on the part of foreign language learners, through the use of criterial checklists. The Council of Europe and the ECML have helped showcase the benefits to be gained from the ELP and the assessment-autonomy link, amongst young and teenage learners, with projects running at local, national and international levels to promote the ELP and its aims. This has resulted in a plethora of articles, anthologies and reports, outlining the virtues of learner-centred assessment and its efficaciousness in developing learner autonomy.

In Higher Education (HE), the assessment-autonomy link in foreign language education is less apparent, with a paucity of studies related to peer- and self-assessment of the productive skills of speaking and writing; moreover, the few that do exist do not always cite the promotion of autonomy as their *raison d'être*. Thus, the role that learner-centred assessment can play in promoting autonomy, particularly in the HE sector, remains something of a conundrum. It was through the desire to unravel some of the mysteries related to peer- and self-assessment of learning in an EFL HE context, and to understand if self-assessment might be an essential missing link in promoting autonomy, that the Assessment for Autonomy Research Project (AARP) was initiated in the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in 2005.

2. *Autonomy, heteronomy and assessment*

According to experts, understanding what autonomy is and what its promotion in language learning entails, is no simple matter. Benson (2009: 24) has described it as „highly ambiguous“, Benson/Voller (1997: 2) as „problematic“ and Tschirhart/Rigler (2009: 71) as „slippery“, while Kohonen (2001: 39), Everhard (2006: 9) and Little (2007: 15) have termed it „elusive“. Aoki (1999: 142) believes it has „many shades of meaning“, while Schmenk (2005: 116) regards it as anything but „self-explanatory“. Due to these enigmaticities, it is customary to begin papers with a definition of what autonomy is, but in the present instance, we will begin by looking at the derivation of the word autonomy and its antonym, and leave our quest for a satisfactory definition for the AARP till the end.

In discussions of autonomy in language learning, it is very rarely mentioned that this word, derived from Greek, actually has an opposite, as shown in Table 1 below:

Word	Greek Derivation	Meaning
autonomy	<i>αὐτός</i> = self <i>νόμος</i> = law	rule, regulation, direction of self
heteronomy	<i>ἕτερος</i> = other <i>νόμος</i> = law	rule, regulation, direction by others

Tab. 1: Derivation and meaning of autonomy and heteronomy

Awareness that there is an opposite to autonomy can be useful to language instructors, since they can then encourage behaviours and activities in their learners which may be more conducive to autonomy and/or less conducive to heteronomy. Such distinctions can be especially useful when it comes to the practices of testing, evaluation and assessment (TEA) of what our learners have actually learned.

McNair (1997, cited in Hughes, 2003: 4) points out that students reach HE having achieved „diverse“ levels of autonomy, so there is the danger that if they continue to learn in the same way as before that they might become „less, rather than more, autonomous“, while Schmenk (2006: 81) emphasizes that heteronomy is not always a bad thing, as does Grow (1991: 129), who con-

The AARP definition of autonomy is offered above in Table 4. Although each semester lasted only 10–13 weeks, the AARP was a significant opportunity for shaping the opinions of a new generation of teachers, imparting, at the same time, important lifelong learning skills. Even though not all students may have approached assessment and the occasions provided for the uptake of autonomy with the same zeal and relish, the important thing is that as far as possible, equal opportunities were offered to all participants. Changes in approach to assessment, such as those proffered by the AARP can be demanding in many ways for learners and instructors alike, but the indications from this apparently unique, replicative, long-term EFL HE study look very encouraging indeed.

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