

Linda Murphy

## Supporting self-evaluation

Helping language learners take control of the assessment process

### *1. Introduction*

This paper explores the relationship between autonomy and assessment in a higher education, distance language learning context in the UK. It considers the issues that surround this relationship before presenting the experience of an approach designed to encourage learners to take control and make decisions about their learning in relation to their assessment. The paper is therefore focusing on the opportunities for learners to exercise autonomy in the assessment process, rather than the assessment of autonomy per se.

### *2. Autonomy and assessment: key issues*

A complex range of definitions, terminology and interpretation surround discussions about autonomy, as summarised by Hurd (2005: 1–2). Within these definitions, there appear to be two key concepts which are essential for the exercise of responsibility and control of learning which researchers such as Holec (1980), Van Lier (1996) and Little (2003) see as fundamental to autonomy: critical reflection and decision-making. Despite widespread agreement on the importance of the development of autonomy as a significant goal for any educational programme (Sinclair 2000: 5) and the efforts of materials designers and writers to achieve this through development of the metacognitive skills of planning, goal-setting, implementing, monitoring and evaluating (following the lead set by authors such as Ellis and Sinclair, 1989, *Learning to Learn English; a Course in Learner Training*), these skills are not always reflected or

acknowledged through the assessment process. Assessment tasks may not offer much opportunity for learners to exercise choice or make decisions. Such a situation can lead learners to doubt teacher exhortations to autonomy and encouragement to take responsibility for their learning. Brockbank and McGill (1998: 30) note the frequent contradiction in institutions which advocate autonomous learning, but whose assessment strategies „value dependency, identification and representation“. This gap between reality and rhetoric, or the lack of what Biggs (1999: 11) terms „constructive alignment“ between teaching and assessment, can undermine efforts to encourage autonomous learning. In distance learning which is generally premised on large-scale participation and assessment, scope for decision-making based on critical reflection in the assessment tasks may be limited. The approach described in this paper is an attempt to address this tension.

The effect of this gap between rhetoric and reality is compounded by concerns about learners' capacity, experience and expectations. Many researchers have noted that the exercise of choice and decision-making to control learning rests on the capacity for critical reflection, but that learners may find reflection difficult or time-consuming and resist taking decisions, perhaps as a result of their previous learning experience (Candy 1991; Ushioda 1996; Benson 2001). This experience may have led them to believe that the teacher should be in charge, direct their activity and correct their efforts, even if in their adult, professional life, they are well-used to taking control. Other researchers (e.g. Cotterall 1995; Wenden 1998; Rivers 2001, Hurd et al. 2001) argue that autonomy depends on the capacity to self-monitor, self-assess and self-evaluate, but as Broady (1996: 223) points out, language learners can be particularly uneasy about assessing their own work. Although learners can gain confidence through practice, the opportunities to do so may not be consistently offered particularly in distance programmes (Murphy 2008). At the same time, teachers may find it hard to let go and encourage learner reflection and decision-making, not only because of their previous experience, but also as a result of the kinds of learner expectations and unease mentioned above (Little 1995).

These concerns have led to a view that it may be possible to overcome learner reluctance to take control by linking it in some way to the assessment process, for example by using assessment tasks to develop reflection (e.g. Thorpe 1995, 2000) or by assessing the reflection, which researchers such as Roberts (2002) see as the only way to secure learner engagement. Thus assessment tasks may include an invitation to the learner to reflect on what they have

of assessing evidence of critical reflection and decision-making that lead to genuine learner control in the assessment process.

For copies of the materials referred to, contact the author linda.murphy@open.ac.uk.

### References

- Benson, P. (2001): *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*, Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Benson, P./Lor. W. (1998): *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning. English Centre Monograph 2*, Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong.
- Biggs, J. (1999): *Teaching for quality learning at university: what the student does*, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Boud, D./Keogh, R./Walker, D. (1985): Promoting reflection in learning: A model, in: D. Boud/R. Keogh/D. Walker (eds): *Reflection, Turning Experience into Learning*, London: Kogan Page, 18–40.
- Boud, D./Walker D. (1993): Barriers to reflection on experience, in D. Boud/R. Cohen/D. Walker (eds): *Using Experience for Learning*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 73–86.
- Brockbank, A./McGill, I. (1998): *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Broady, E. (1996): Learner Attitudes towards self-direction, in: E. Broady/M. Kenning (eds): *Promoting Learner Autonomy in University Language Teaching*, London: CILT, 215–236.
- Brookfield, S. (1987): *Developing Critical Thinking: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*, San Fransisco: Jossey Bass.
- Candy, P. C. (1991): *Self-direction for lifelong learning. A comprehensive guide to theory and practice*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cotterall, S. (1995): Readiness for autonomy: investigating learners' beliefs, in: *System*, 23 (2), 195–205.
- Ellis, G./Sinclair, B. (1989): *Learning to Learn English: A Course in Learner Training*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holec, H. (1980): *Autonomy and foreign language learning*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

- Hurd, S. (2005): Autonomy and the distance language learner, in: B. Holmberg/M. Shelley/C.J. White (eds): *Distance education and languages: evolution and change*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1–19.
- Hurd, S./Beaven, T./Ortega, A. (2001): Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: issues and dilemmas for course writers, in: *System*, 29 (3), 341–355.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984): *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Little, D. (1995): The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy, in: *System*, 23 (2), 175–181.
- Little, D. (2003): Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning, in: *The guide to good practice for learning and teaching in languages, linguistics and area studies*. <http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/goodpractice.aspx?resourceid=1409> (11.02.2011).
- Murphy, L. (2008): Supporting learner autonomy: Developing practice through the production of courses for distance learners of French, German and Spanish, in: *Language Teaching Research*, 12 (1), 83–102.
- Newton, R. (1996): *Getting to grips with barriers to reflection*, paper presented at 26<sup>th</sup> Annual SCUTREA conference, School of Continuing Education, University of Leeds.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2002): *Academic Standards: Languages and Related Studies*, Gloucester: QAA.
- Rivers, W. P. (2001): Autonomy at all costs: an ethnography of metacognitive self-assessment and self-management among experienced language learners, in: *The Modern Language Journal*, 85 (2), 279–290.
- Roberts, B. (2002): Reflection and learning at a distance, in: *Open Learning*, 17 (1), 39–55.
- Sinclair, B. (2000): Learner autonomy: The next phase?, in: B. Sinclair/I. McGrath/T. Lamb (eds): *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 4–14.
- Thorpe, M. (1995): Reflective learning in distance education, in: *European Journal of Psychology in Education*, 10 (2), 153–167.
- Thorpe, M. (2000): Encouraging students to reflect as part of the assessment process: student responses and tutor feedback, in: *Active Learning*, 1 (1), 72–92.
- Ushioda, E. (1996): *Learner autonomy 5: the role of motivation*, Dublin: Authentik.

van Lier, L. (1996): *Interaction in the language classroom: awareness, autonomy and authenticity*, London: Longman.

Wenden, A. L. (1998): Metacognitive knowledge and language learning, in: *Applied Linguistics*, 19 (4), 515–537.

Dr. Linda Murphy, recently retired from The Open University (UK), Department of Languages in the Faculty of Education and Language Studies, Linda.Murphy@open.ac.uk.