DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A SOCIAL-INTERACTIVE VIEW OF LEARNING AND THREE FUNDAMENTAL PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

David Little
Trinity College, Dublin

ABSTRACT

The first part of this article explores the concept of learner autonomy from the perspective of a social-interactive view of learning. The second part elaborates three fundamental pedagogical principles derived from this view and calculated to develop learner autonomy: the principle of learner empowerment; the principle of appropriate target language use; and the principle of using language as a cognitive tool.

INTRODUCTION

In formal educational contexts, learners are autonomous when they set their own learning agenda and take responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluating particular learning activities and the learning process overall. The practice of learner autonomy thus depends upon, but also develops and expands, the learner's capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action (Little 1991, 4).

Although the development of such a capacity has usually been one of the implied aims of education, it has only rarely been a central and explicit concern of pedagogical practice. When the Council of Europe published Henri Holec's report *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* in 1979 (cited here as Holec 1981), the concept of learner autonomy as a fundamental pedagogical goal was already central to general theories of adult education, but it had not been much discussed in relation to foreign language learning at any level. Over the next twenty years, however, it was to attract more and more attention and now, at the end of the 1990s, it is one of the terms that crops up most often in discussion of foreign language teaching.

The word "autonomy", with its overtones of independence and self-determination, invites a focus on the individual rather than the group, which is no doubt responsible for the widespread misconception that learner autonomy is essentially a matter of learning without a teacher. Particularly in universities this misconception has been further encouraged by the frequent discussion of learner autonomy in relation to self-access learning, where (almost by definition) learners work on their own, at their own speed, and according to their own understanding of their needs. Concern with the individual learner to the exclusion of the group has been further encouraged by the rise of interest in learning strategies (e.g., Wenden and Rubin 1987, Oxford 1990). After all, the definition with which I began clearly implies that learner autonomy entails the conscious deployment of appropriate strategies in relation to particular learning activities and to the learning process overall, and those strategies are generated within the minds of individual learners.

Against these tendencies, I shall argue in this article that if we concern ourselves exclusively with learning as an individual cognitive process, we shall fall short of a full appreciation of what learner autonomy is and (perhaps more seriously) our pedagogical attempts to foster its development will remain partial and quite possibly unsuccessful. In advocating a social-interactive view of learning, I do not of course wish to deny the importance of individual cognitive aspects of learning; but I do want to suggest that we shall not fully understand those aspects if we do not pay equal attention to the social-interactive processes by which learning is mediated. It is fundamental to my argument that all human beings are necessarily autonomous in the sense that they are self-producing organisms; that one of the manifestations of this autonomy is the capacity for metacognition; but that autonomy becomes more than a biological fact only to the extent that our capacity for metacognition (reflective self-awareness) is developed and refined by consciously harnessing it to explicit goals. The article is divided into two main parts. In the first part I explain what I mean by a social-interactive view of learning, and in the second part I derive from this view three fundamental principles that I believe must be fulfilled if formal language learning is to be maximally effective.

A SOCIAL-INTERACTIVE VIEW OF LEARNING

A social-interactive view of learning amounts to a great deal more than acknowledging that learning in formal contexts has an inescapable social dimension. Rather, it is founded on particular claims about the way human beings are, which in turn lead to claims about the relation between individual cognition and social interaction, and the relation between thought and language. This means that in order to elaborate a social-interactive view of learning in formal contexts, we must first consider the nature of developmental learning.

DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING

Human beings are autonomous in the sense that they are self-producing organisms (Maturana and Varela 1987); that is, they grow according to the dictates of their genetic inheritance. The geneticist Steven Rose puts the matter thus:

> The central property of all life is the capacity and necessity to build, maintain and preserve itself, a process known as *autopoiesis*. This is why it is in the very nature of life and living processes themselves that we, as living organisms and specifically as humans, are free agents. (Rose 1997, 18)

As we grow, we develop the physical and other attributes characteristic of our species, and in physical appearance, temperament and cast of mind we come to resemble our close relatives. On the other hand, we "produce ourselves" only in an appropriate environment, in interaction with other humans. The relative influence on human development of gene and environment, nature and nurture, is a matter of controversy among biologists (see, for example, Dawkins 1976, Rose et al. 1984). But the very complexity of developmental processes is such that it is wise, as Rose suggests, to avoid crude dichotomies:

> We need instead to be concerned with process, with the paradox of development by which any organism has simultaneously to *be* and to *become*, as when a newborn infant must be capable of sucking at the breast while at the same time developing the competence to chew and digest solid food, and with the continuous interchange between organisms and their environments. (Rose 1997, 18)

The notion of "interchange between organisms and their environments" is the very foundation of a social-interactive view of learning, and we see it in operation in the first human relationship that any of us experiences, that between child and mother. The apparently instinctive behaviour of mothers towards their babies seems calculated to elicit various kinds of response and thus lay the foundations of interaction by encouraging an early sense of reciprocity. But this is by no means a one-sided process: research has shown that from birth babies themselves are intent on gaining the attention of their mothers and thus initiating interaction (see, e.g., Trevarthen 1977, Schaffer 1987). The organism (the baby) is influenced by the environment (the baby's mother), but in turn exerts its own influence on the environment.

The reciprocity of social interaction presupposes that the individual has a rapidly developing sense not only of his own thoughts, needs and purposes but also of the thoughts, needs and purposes of others —what developmental psychologists call "theory of mind" (Wellman 1990, Bartsch and Wellman 1995). This emerges very early; as the following two examples from Bartsch and Wellman (1995) show, it is already present in a sophisticated form in the reasoning of children between three and four years of age:

> MARK (3 years, 11 months): Why did the chicken cross the road?
> ROSS (5 years, 9 months): I don't know.
> MARK: Well, because his house always ...always got ...haunted.
> FATHER: Haunted? And he didn't like it?
> MARK: *Yeah, he, he think... he thought there were haunted things in his house*.
>
> (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, p.17; italics added)

ABE (3 years, 7 months): I don't wanna go.
FATHER: Why?
ABE: Because.
FATHER: How come?
ABE: *They would think I'm not there.*
FATHER: What?
ABE: *They would think Stan and Ann* [Abe's parents] *had not a kid*.
FATHER: Why would they think that if you came?
ABE: *No. They would think that if I didn't came*.

(Bartsch and Wellman 1995, 37; italics added)

As these examples remind us, social interaction entails communication, and the principal tool of human communication is language. This raises fundamental questions about the relation between general cognitive development and first language acquisition, between thought and language. It seems clear that we are born with (to say the least) a predisposition to develop a "theory of mind" and a predisposition to acquire the language of our immediate environment; at the same time, however, neither faculty can develop without the stimulus of interaction. But are general cognitive development and first language acquisition separate processes, or do they interact with one another, so that at some levels thought and language are inseparable?

One answer to this question was provided by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), who argued that our higher cognitive functions (those that are unique to humans) are internalized from social interaction, which is shaped by language. According to Vygotsky, language plays a central role in learning because it is the symbolic tool by which we guide problem-solving behaviour. In his view "inner speech" —the thought clothed in language that we often use to plan, monitor and evaluate our behaviour— is internalized from "social speech" via "egocentric speech" (see, e.g., Vygotsky 1986, 86 ff.). This process is summarized by Bershon (1992, 37) as follows:

> Speech used for problem solving begins during social encounters involving communication and mutual regulation between children and adults or among children of varying capabilities. In this way, children build a lexicon of regulatory vocabulary that enables them to produce egocentric language to direct, control and plan their activities during problem solving. Finally, children internalize this language as inner speech, developing a vocabulary that they can draw on during task involvement to direct their actions.

It is important to stress that Vygotsky's view of the relation between thought and language had to do with our higher cognitive functions, those that are implicated in consciousness and explicit processes of self-regulation; he nowhere claimed that there are no processes of thought that are independent of language. Neither an exclusively cognitive nor an exclusively communicative view of language seems to be supported by empirical research evidence (see Carruthers and Boucher 1998). On the whole it seems likely that while some aspects of thought are independent of language, others

are not. But for our present purposes it is not necessary to take sides in what is a complex and often highly technical argument. It is enough to recognize the indispensable role that language plays as a cognitive tool, "a key resource by which we effectively redescribe our own thoughts in a format which makes them available for a variety of new operations and manipulations" (Clark 1998, 178). Without language, it is difficult to imagine either consciousness or metacognition, that complex of processes by which we have thoughts about thoughts, beliefs about beliefs, and so on; for without language it is difficult to imagine how representations that are implicit in the mind could be "redescribed" so that they become explicit to the mind (Karmiloff-Smith 1992). This a matter of pivotal importance in a social-interactive view of child development; as we shall see, it is also centrally important to a social-interactive theory of foreign language pedagogy.

Schooling

In relation to the developmental trajectory that precedes it, early schooling embodies two tendencies that pull in opposite directions, and it is the task of pedagogy to reconcile them. On the one hand, the explicit processes of schooling offer to intensify by artificial means the natural development of metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness. In this the acquisition of literacy plays a central role. For in the early school years the child must learn how to map the sounds of her mother tongue on to the graphic system by which they are represented visually; and in doing so she inevitably draws upon and further develops her metalinguistic awareness. Indeed, precisely because it depends on explicit processes, one view of literacy equates it with metalinguistics (this argument is developed by Olson 1991).

The relation between speaking and writing is, however, less straightforward than those last two sentences seem to imply. It is, of course, true that in the history of any language, speech is prior to writing; and it is also true that some traditions in linguistics have taught us to think of written language as (in principle) speech transcribed (see, e.g., Bloomfield 1933, 21). But as Olson (1995) has pointed out, writing systems gradually evolved from symbolic systems that were designed to record information graphically but non-linguistically. This fact helps to explain why written forms of language have developed functions but also structures that have no equivalent in the spoken language. It also reminds us of Clark's (1996, 1998) view of language as a cognitive tool: as we shall see, the effects he is concerned with are particularly evident when writing is the medium in which language embodies thought.

If the processes of schooling offer to continue by artificial means the natural development of metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness, they are also largely discontinuous with the child's previous experience to the extent that they are driven by explicit plans and focus on systematic bodies of explicit knowledge. This latter fact has been used to account for the sense of alienation that learners (not just young children) often experience in formal learning environments (see, e.g., Freire 1972, Illich 1979, Mayher 1990). It is also reflected in the distinction that Barnes (1976, 81) draws between "school knowledge" ("the knowledge which someone else presents to us") and "action knowledge" ("that view of the world on which our actions are based"). According to this view, one of the central tasks of pedagogy is to find ways of bringing "school knowledge" into fruitful interaction with learners' "action knowledge" in

order to enrich and extend, and especially to make more explicit, the autonomy that learners already possess as a product of their natural development. As Barnes (ibid., 80) puts it:

> We educate children in order to change their behaviour by changing their view of the world. We want to change the way they perceive the world they live in, not so that they will carry out our purposes, but so that they can formulate their own purposes, and estimate their value.

Pedagogical research that has grappled with this problem has returned again and again to the social-interactive nature of formal learning environments and the key role played by work in small groups. For it is when learners work collaboratively to solve problems that they are most likely to exercise and further develop the "metalinguistic function" (Bruner 1986) that mediates between "school knowledge" and the "action knowledge" they bring with them to the classroom (see, e.g., the research reported by Barnes 1986, Tharp and Gallimore 1988, Mercer 1995).

The argument so far may be summarized as follows. Human beings are autonomous in the sense that they are self-producing organisms. Their autonomy becomes something more than a biological fact thanks to their capacity for metacognition, which begins to develop from a very early age under the stimulus of social interaction. Because speech is the symbolic tool that we use to shape, comment on and evaluate shared activity, language is also fundamental to the processes of metacognition; at the same time, the more developed the individual's metacognitive capacity, the greater the contribution he or she can make to social-interactive processes. The same two-way relationship obtains in contexts of formal learning. On the one hand the interactive pursuit of learning goals both presupposes and develops the metacognitive capacity on which the individual learner's powers of reflection, decision making and independent action are founded; on the other hand growth in the individual learner's metacognitive capacity increases the effectiveness of the social-interactive learning processes of which he or she is a part. In other words, the individual's gradually expanding capacity for independent behaviour arises from but also feeds back into the interdependence that underpins social interaction.

THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: THREE FUNDAMENTAL PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

The social-interactive view of human development and human learning that I have briefly elaborated seems to me to imply three fundamental principles for foreign language pedagogy. First, learners should be involved from the beginning in setting learning goals, planning and monitoring learning activities, and evaluating learning outcomes; this is the principle of learner empowerment. Second, learners should be required to use the target language as the dominant medium of learning from the earliest stages; this is the principle of appropriate target language use. And third, the chief means by which learner empowerment is confirmed and appropriate target language use is managed should be the written lan-

guage; this is the principle of using language as a cognitive tool. I shall enlarge on each of these principles in turn.

Learner empowerment

If we think of learning as an exclusively individual-cognitive process, we are likely also to think of the classroom as no more than a necessary evil, created to cope with the economic impossibility of providing separate formal learning facilities for each individual learner. According to such a view, it may from time to time be useful for learners to work together to rehearse some of the knowledge and practise some of the skills the curriculum requires them to develop; but the individual learner remains pedagogy's central focus. By contrast, a social-interactive view of learning recognizes that the classroom is precisely the kind of learning environment that human nature demands. Developmental learning arises from a symbiotic relation between the individual-cognitive and the social-interactive, and in principle schooling should be no different. According to the social-interactive view, appropriately focussed interaction between learners is likely to be the best way of stimulating the cognitive growth of individual learners.

Developmental learning is a matter not only of cognitive and linguistic growth; it also entails socialization and acculturation. Again Rose's notion of "interchange between organisms and their environments" (1997, 18) is relevant; for the child is socialized and acculturated according to the norms of the society into which she has been born in order that she can in turn contribute in an integrated manner to the multifarious processes of that society. A social-interactive view of learning argues that classrooms should generate the same bidirectionality. But whereas questions of interest, relevance and motivation do not arise in developmental learning (the child's total involvement in the process can be taken for granted), in formal learning these questions signal one of the central problems that pedagogy has to resolve.

As we have seen, pedagogical theorists who have recognized this problem have looked for ways of bringing "action knowledge" and "school knowledge" into fruitful interplay with one another. Their solutions may differ in detail, but they are all founded on the same principle: that if learners of any age are to become fully involved in formal learning of any kind, they must develop their own reasons for learning and their own agenda and learning goals (see, e.g., Barnes 1976, Rogers 1983, Tharp and Gallimore 1988, Mayher 1990). Since the setting of a learning agenda and the identification of appropriate goals is something that must be done at regular intervals on the basis of feedback, it follows that learners must also become fully involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning activities. Such involvement is the essence of learner empowerment.

It is important at this point to recognize three facts. First, because the metacognitive capacity is part of developed human nature, all learners are in principle capable of reflective self-regulation, and thus of autonomous learning behaviour. Second, differences in genetic inheritance and domestic environment nevertheless mean that some learners develop a greater and more effective capacity for autonomous learning than others. And third, like other human capacities, the capacity for autonomous learning develops gradually and with practice, and if it is not maintained in regular use it may well decline. These three facts combine to define the teacher's role. From the very beginning she must be intent on handing over control to her learners, but only as

much control as they are capable of exercising to their own benefit. She must not fall into the trap of supposing that learners should be capable of managing every aspect of their learning from the outset, or that there will ever come a time when she herself is not responsible for control of the learning environment.

Progressive learner empowerment requires continuous negotiation between teacher and learners. Not only must the teacher engage her learners in the setting of a learning agenda and the identification of learning targets; she must also ensure that learners are fully aware of the requirements of the curriculum. In other words, through regular whole-class planning and evaluation, she must help the learners to set long-term as well as short-term goals and to develop a sense of the trajectory of their learning not only across lessons or the few weeks that it may take to complete a particular phase of learning, but also across terms and years. Negotiation at this macro level is supported by negotiation at the micro level, which concerns short-term learning goals and individual learning activities.

Negotiation is rooted in learners' metacognitive capacity since it requires that they talk about talk and think about thinking. According to a social-interactive view, collaborative learning activity, or group work, is the obvious way of developing learners' metacognitive capacity, their ability to control what Bruner (1986) calls the "metalinguistic function" (see above). For efficient collaboration in any domain requires that each participant makes plain to the others his or her particular view of the task in hand, how it is best approached, why this particular strategy is not working, and so on. In this interpretation group work is much more than a means of rehearsing knowledge and practising skills already acquired: it is the means by which knowledge is collaboratively constructed. At its most efficient, group work enables learners to pool relevant "action knowledge" as they establish a joint perspective on whatever aspect of "school knowledge" is currently on their agenda; and in this way they learn from one another as well as from the curriculum.

One of the best accounts of how negotiation between teachers and learners should be conducted in practice is provided by Leni Dam (1995). In her classroom learning is driven by the never-ending attempt to answer five questions: What are we learning? Why are we learning it? How are we learning it? How effective is our learning? What use can we make of our learning? These questions are appropriate to any kind of formal learning, of course, as is the principle of learner empowerment. Only when it is brought into interaction with the principle of appropriate target language use does it take on features that are specific to the foreign language classroom.

Appropriate target language use

The differences between first language acquisition and the learning of foreign languages in schools and other formal learning environments are immediately obvious and do not need to be elaborated here. But there is one similarity between the two processes that is fundamental to our present purposes: proficiency in any language is a procedural skill, and like procedural skills in other domains, it develops through use. Children acquiring their mother tongue do not first learn the language in order then to communicate; on the contrary, their linguistic development proceeds partly as a result of their attempts to communicate. By deploying whatever proficiency they possess, they create one of the necessary conditions for further growth. In the same

way, proficiency in a foreign language can develop only to the extent that learners use whatever proficiency they have for genuine communicative purposes. That, in essence, is the principle of appropriate target language use.

This principle entails that the target language should be the preferred medium of teaching and learning from the outset and comprises three general rules. First, the teacher must speak to her learners in the target language, but in such a way that they can understand her. This means that she must be skilled in simplifying and reformulating her utterances; it also means that there will be occasions when the shortest route to comprehension is a brief gloss in the learners' mother tongue. Second, the learners must themselves be under constant pressure to use the target language to the full extent of their present capacity. This involves a great deal more than producing formulaic responses to the teacher's questions, or rehearsing a dialogue or role play from the textbook. Learners' target language proficiency will embrace a full range of discourse roles only to the extent that those roles are freely available to them in the foreign language classroom. This brings us back to the principle of learner empowerment, for to say that learners have access to a full range of discourse roles is the same as saying that they share fully in responsibility for what goes on in the classroom. It also reminds us of the central role that group work has to play in the collaborative construction of knowledge.

The third of the general rules that together constitute the principle of appropriate target language use is already implied by the second. It has to do with metacognition and the "metalinguistic function" —or, in more practical terms, with the use of the target language to talk about learning at the macro and micro levels as well as about the target language itself. Teachers who accept the first two general rules not infrequently reject this third one, arguing that planning and evaluating learning and discussing formal features of language require a level of linguistic sophistication that is available to learners only in their mother tongue. This rejection is misguided precisely because metacognition and language are so thoroughly interdependent. A moment's reflection on the frequency with which we talk about talk and think about thinking in our mother tongue should be enough to persuade us that any worthwhile proficiency in a foreign language must also embrace the "metalinguistic function". Indeed, without it learners will find it difficult to get far in the exercise of those discourse roles that require them to take and justify initiatives and evaluate their outcomes.

Of course, like the capacity for autonomous learning itself, the capacity for metacognition can be exercised at many different levels. Even with much support from the teacher (who can provide her learners with appropriate words and phrases and help them to construct evaluative perspectives), beginning learners will be capable of expressing only the most general kinds of judgement. But unless they learn how to use the target language to evaluate their learning at this very basic level, how can they hope to progress to more sophisticated analysis?

THE USE OF LANGUAGE AS A COGNITIVE TOOL

A social-interactive view of learning assigns a central pedagogical role to learner empowerment, and a social-interactive view of language learning requires that learners exercise their responsibility through the target language. My third fundamental principle, the use of language as a cognitive tool, insists on the necessity of using the written language to elaborate learning plans, remind learners of agreed learning tasks,

capture parts of the learning process, summarize individual and collective evaluations, and so on. The two obvious instruments for doing this are the individual learner's notebook, logbook or diary, and posters that are displayed on the classroom wall.

This is no doubt unexceptionable. In literate societies the use of writing to support learning is taken for granted; and it is clear enough that the metacognitive demands of a social-interactive pedagogy are unlikely to be met unless plans and evaluations are written down, at least some learning activities are conducted partly in writing, and learners frequently focus on written forms of the language. Expressed in these terms, it might seem that the use of language as a cognitive tool is little more than a matter of rather superficial common sense. However, the close relation between language and metacognition offers us a more complex and profound perspective, which Clark (1998) encapsulates in what he calls the "mangrove effect" of metacognition. He writes as follows:

> The Mangrove grows from a floating seed which establishes itself in the water, rooting in shallow mud flats. The seedling sends complex vertical roots through the surface of the water, culminating in what looks to all intents and purposes like a small tree posing on stilts. The complex system of aerial roots, however, soon traps floating soil, weed and debris. After a time, the accumulation of trapped matter forms a small island. As more time passes, the island grows larger and larger. A growing mass of such islands can eventually merge, effectively extending the shoreline out to the trees! Throughout this process, and despite our prior intuitions, it is the land which is progressively built by the trees. (Clark 1998, 176)

Clark likens the role played by language in metacognition to the mangrove: "It is natural to suppose that words are always rooted in the fertile soil of pre-existing thoughts. But sometimes, at least, the influence seems to run in the other direction" (ibid.). He then has this to say on the effect of writing ideas down:

> By writing down our ideas we generate a trace in a format which opens up a range of new possibilities. We can then inspect and re-inspect the same ideas, coming at them from many different angles and in many different frames of mind. We can hold the original ideas steady so that we may judge them, and safely experiment with subtle alterations. We can store them in ways which allow us to compare and combine them with other complexes of ideas in ways which would quickly defeat the un-augmented imagination. (ibid.)

The relevance of the "mangrove effect" to the foreign language classroom should be too obvious to require further elaboration.

CONCLUSION

In any domain the most successful learners are those who develop the highest degree of autonomy, both as learners and in the extent to which they can deploy their

knowledge and skills outside the immediate context in which they have been acquired. Yet pedagogy has rarely concerned itself specifically with the development of learner autonomy, largely (I believe) because it has too often failed to appreciate the inescapable bi-directional relation between the individual-cognitive and the social-interactive. This relation is accorded central importance in the social-interactive view of human development and human learning that I have briefly elaborated in the first part of this article; and it gives rise to the three fundamental pedagogical principles that I have defined and enlarged upon in the second part.

Perhaps the most important consideration governing the successful implementation of these principles in the classroom derives from what Steven Rose (1997, 18; see above) describes as "the paradox of development by which any organism has simultaneously to *be* and to *become*". Applied to the foreign language classroom, this paradox requires that in order to become autonomous learners must be autonomous, and in order to become proficient in their target language they must exercise their proficiency; and it entails that in order to do these two things they must use written forms of the target language as a cognitive tool. The implementation of our three principles requires constant effort, resourcefulness and vigilance on the part of the teacher. Success is not always easy to achieve, but when it comes —see, e.g., Leni Dam's (1995) account of her own experience over twenty years, or the video of Hanne Thomsen's classroom (Thomsen and Gabrielsen 1991)— the rewards are immense. No pedagogy can eliminate individual learner differences; some learners will always learn more quickly and more effectively than others. But a foreign language pedagogy derived from an appreciation of the importance of the social-interactive dimension of learning has the power to create a community of learners all of whom are users of their target language. Of how many other approaches can that be said?

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