LANGUAGE ACQUISITION WITHOUT GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION?: THE EVIDENCE FROM AN AUTONOMOUS CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The article is concerned with the language practices and the linguistic outcomes of a foreign language classroom in which young learners acquire the English language according to the principles of autonomous language learning. The data derive from the LAALE project (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment) whose aim it was to systematically observe the linguistic progress of a Danish mixed ability class over a period of four years. In this classroom the learners were not exposed to any grammar instruction, but had to work out the syntactic rules of the foreign language themselves. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the data, they are compared with data from traditionally taught learners of the same age.

0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Ever since foreign languages have been taught systematically in institutional contexts, the question has been discussed whether explicit grammar instruction facilitates the acquisition process and if so, whether the processes are affected in a direct or more indirect way. Most traditional teaching approaches take for granted that grammar instruction forms a short-cut to language mastery and subscribe to the blessings of instructional techniques in one way or another. By contrast, the minority view has always been that rule teaching/learning leads to a type of grammatical knowledge which cannot be accessed and made use of in authentic communicative situations. The efforts put into grammar teaching are, therefore, considered a waste of time,

which is, for example, the position the British philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) put forward as early as in 1693:

> ... yet the ordinary way of Learning it [= Latin] in a Grammar-School [...] I cannot be forward to incourage. The Reasons against it are so evident, and cogent, that they have prevailed with some intelligent Persons, to quit the ordinary road, not without success, though the Method made use of was not exactly that, which I imagine the easiest, and in short is this. To trouble the Child with no *Grammar* at all, but to have *Latin,* as *English* has been, without the perplexity of Rules, talked into him; for if you will consider it, *Latin* is no more unknown to a Child, when he comes into the World, than *English:* And yet he learns *English* without Master, Rule or Grammar; and so might he Latin too, ... (218) For Languages, being to be learn'd by Roate, Custom, and Memory, are then spoken in greatest Perfection, when all Rules of Grammar are utterly forgotten. (221)

This article will summarize the various arguments in the discussion and report on the successes of a foreign classroom in which no grammar instruction was provided. The data derive from the LAALE project (*Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment*) whose aim it was to systematically observe the linguistic progress of a Danish mixed ability class that acquired the English language according to the principles of autonomous language learning. The data were collected over a period of four years, and they are compared with data from traditionally taught learners who were subjected to the same tests at identical stages of their learning careers.

1. THE ISSUES OF THE DEBATE

The discussion on the role of grammar usually revolves around two different, though related issues:

• The relationship between L1 and L2 learning, primarily discussed in second language acquisition theory.
• The notion of learning transfer or the effects of formal instruction in general, a problem which language pedagogy has mainly been concerned with.

Since explicit grammar instruction and explicit grammatical knowledge are of no relevance in L1 acquisition, the obvious question is to what extent foreign language learning is similar or dissimilar to mother tongue acquisition. Proponents of direct or natural teaching methods have always stressed that the underlying learning processes are basically the same and that explicit rule learning does not speed up the process. Their methodologies have thus tried to replicate the conditions of mother tongue acquisition as closely as possible.

By contrast, advocates of the "grammar-is-a-short-cut" position would insist on the qualitative differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. Their main arguments relate to

• the overall time of exposure in L1 acquisition and classroom settings,

• the different cognitive capacities and developmental stages learners are in,

• the interweaving of cognitive and linguistic developments in L1 acquisition,

• the simultaneity of L1 acquisition and primary socialisation, which leads to attitudinal/motivational dispositions qualitatively different from those in L2 acquisition.

• the fact that second language learners have already internalised a linguistic system which can either interfere with the acquisition of a new system, or which can be made use of by the learners as a knowledge resource. In either case the existence of an L1 system makes a qualitative difference.

Advocates of grammar instruction in foreign language learning would thus claim that rule generalizations can and need to compensate for the lack of exposure time and that the advanced developmental cognitive states of foreign language learners ought to be taken into account.

The notion of grammar instruction conventionally implies formal practice, which is considered essential for learners to automatize the regularities of the target language.

It is, however, with regard to the latter assumptions that empirical investigations have cast doubts on the efficacy of code-oriented practice, and by implication of traditional rule instruction. The issues involved have been discussed under the headings of "interface" and "non-interface positions".

The interface position holds that whatever explicit rule knowledge has been acquired and practised in form-focused exercises can turn into implicit knowledge and thus be put to use in genuine communication. This seems to be the theoretical underpinning to most traditional teaching approaches. They set great store in the transfer concept which implies that the learning outcomes of explicit rule teaching combined with manipulative language exercises can transfer to real-life conditions.

By contrast, the non-interface position is much more pessimistic in this respect and assumes that the respective underlying psycholinguistic processes are qualitatively different, and build up different types of knowledge stores which do not interact in significant ways (cf. Krashen 1981). These assumptions combine with the teachability hypothesis as put forward by Pienemann (1984, 1989). In a series of experimental studies Pienemann has shown that explicit instruction of grammatical points and practice does not have significant effects on the communicative availability of these structures. Grammar teaching —and this is one of the major findings— cannot change the natural order of acquisition. Only under certain conditions can teaching speed up the learning process, i.e. when learners have reached a developmental stage at which they are "ready" to acquire the forms of the next stage. Since learners in a classroom will have reached different developmental stages at any one time and since our knowledge of the natural order of acquisition is quite limited, no coursebook can grade the linguistic material according to the linguistic needs of all the learners.

Empirical studies that relate to the issues under discussion have focused either on the relationship between explicit rule knowledge and use in formal tasks, on the one hand, or on the correlation between code-focused practising (entailing a certain amount of grammar instruction) and use of the respective structures in authentic communicative situations, on the other. Studies of the former type include Seliger 1979, Green/

Hecht 1992, Legenhausen 1995; of the latter type Terrell (1991), Ellis 1984 could be mentioned. Ellis 1990 contains a survey of relevant studies. Although the correlations in both cases vary between "none", "low", and —more rarely— "positive", the overall tendency is to confirm a rather weak (or even non-existent) relationship between formal instruction and appropriate use in communicative situations.

The obvious conclusion from the majority of these studies would be to dispense with grammar teaching and controlled formal practice altogether. However, this is not what most authors suggest. The following interpretations and recommendations are put forward instead:

• The effects of formal instruction might be indirect and delayed rather than immediate. Grammar teaching will raise the learners' level of linguistic awareness and enable them to "notice" structural aspects which do not yet form part of their interlanguage competence. This noticing is seen as a pre-requisite to learning.

• Grammar instruction as carried out in "traditional" approaches should be replaced by forms of discovery learning which leads to "consciousness-raising". Only formal or code-focused practice is inefficient, whereas meaning-focused tasks might facilitate and promote acquisition.

There is another reason why researchers hesitate to recommend a "no grammar-and-formal-practice" methodology. Most studies on the effects of formal instruction are experimental in nature and relate to short-term outcomes only. What is largely lacking are long-term studies on linguistic outcomes of learning/teaching approaches in which grammar instruction does not play a role. That is why a close analysis of the linguistic data of the LAALE project seems to be all the more pertinent.

Before the data on emerging grammatical structures in an autonomous classroom are discussed, though, the guiding principles of such an approach as developed by Breen, Dam, Little and others should be briefly outlined[1].

2. GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF AN AUTONOMOUS CLASSROOM

The classic definition of learner autonomy was put forward by Holec in a report for the Council of Europe in 1979. In his view autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". This entails

> ... to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all
>   aspects of this learning, i.e.
> - determining the objectives;
> - defining the contents and progressions;
> - selecting methods and techniques to be used;
> - monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place,
>   etc.); evaluating what has been acquired. (Holec 1981:3)

The definition of learner autonomy should be complemented by the "learners' willingness" to take over responsibility for their learning, which has sometimes turned

out to be a pedagogical challenge with learners who have been socialized into more passive learning behaviours. However, if learners are granted a "freedom of choice", which is a prerequisite for authentic actions (cf. van Lier 1996), the chances of developing a learning path according to their own interests and needs and of generating inherent motivations are greatly enhanced.

Authenticity —a multi-faceted concept— thus becomes another key-notion of an autonomous classroom. Whereas in the communicative methodology of the 70s and 80s the authenticity of learning materials took first priority, the autonomous classroom emphasizes the authenticity of the social interactions. This means that the activities enacted in the classroom should result from the students' interests and wants, and only be constrained by the learning objectives as defined by the curriculum. If students can —in this way— exercise their freedom of choice, the authenticity of the communicative interactions follows as a corollary. This in turn guarantees that language learning processes are supported in the best possible way. The underlying assumption is that "language learning is language use" or as Ellis put it in 1994: "The way language is learned is a reflection of the way it is used" (p. 365). The notion of language use in this sense excludes formal manipulative use in exercise-like activities, but refers exclusively to authentic communicative situations. The autonomous classroom is thus characterised by the absence of formal practice and "do-as-if-behaviour". The teacher would insist on not asking any questions to which she could provide the answer herself[2].

In order for learners to develop a keener sense of their learning needs, the main task of the teacher is to systematically initiate awareness-raising processes which refer to all aspects of the learning/teaching undertaking. Of special interest are activities which focus on the learning process as such. By making the learning process the topic of discussion, the process is turned into learning content. Other awareness-raising activities relate to language forms and functions, to communication as a process, and to aspects of information gathering and processing in general. This approach sees learners essentially in the roles of researchers: The learner's attitude in discovery learning must be regarded as identical to the researcher's attitude in his or her quest for new knowledge.

A classroom in which these principles are implemented is basically incompatible with a textbook-based lockstep approach, and requires other well-defined organisational principles. It is for example essential that classroom procedures and the learning process are well-documented by learners as well as by the teacher. Project results and learning outcomes need to be made public, and are thus recycled as new —learner-produced— learning materials into the overall process.

Activities are largely project-based and imply extended and elaborate planning phases, and they continually undergo evaluations by the teacher, but more importantly by the learners themselves. Evaluation forms the cornerstone of an autonomous classroom[3].

3. THE LAALE PROJECT

As mentioned before, the data which will be discussed below are based on the LAALE project when the class of autonomous learners had been learning English for

17 months. They took up English in the 5th grade as 12-year-olds, and there were eleven girls and ten boys in the class altogether. In the first two years, their English timetable comprised two 90-minute periods per week, which was later reduced to one 90-minute and one 45-minute period.

The analysis will focus on the way autonomous learners used certain grammatical structures in so-called "peer-to-peer talks" and informal interviews which took place on the same day. In peer-to-peer talks pairs of learners are asked to engage in a conversation about topics of their own choice. It is an activity the Danish learner group is familiar with, since "two-minute talks" belong to the stock of activity types they can choose from.

The data from the Danish comprehensive school class will be compared with data from learners who attended a German "Gymnasium" (= grammar school). Since the German school system is a three-tier system which selects learners according to aptitude at a fairly early stage, this means that there were hardly any low-ability students in that class. Only about 40 percent of the students attend a "Gymnasium" and these students eventually intend to take A-level examinations and take up university studies. Their English lessons are based on the most widespread textbook in Germany *Learning English: Green Line*, which implements a grammar-based "communicative" syllabus as defined in the 80s[4]. In other words, this approach implies systematic grammar instruction and formal practice, but at the same time free communicative activities are considered important. With 31 learners the Gymnasium class was larger, but their English time-table included five 45-minute lessons, equally spread over the week, and the data were collected after 18 months of instruction. The German learners were systematically prepared to cope with that task, since the textbook includes a series of exercises with phrases and structures that might turn out to be useful for that activity.

Both learner groups had to do this "peer-to-peer talk" twice, each time with a different partner. All the conversations and interviews were videotaped and transcribed. The corpus comprises twenty conversations and 19 interviews from Danish learners (approx.13,000 words) and 29 conversations and 31 interviews from the German grammar school class (approx. 19,000 words)[5].

4. THE USE OF GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES BY AUTONOMOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEARNERS

The following analysis will focus on some core grammatical structures that had emerged or were emerging in the autonomous classroom, and that were also used by traditional learners since they had been introduced through the textbook. Questions relating to the issues under discussion include:

• How accurately do autonomous learners use grammar structures compared to learners who have undergone systematic grammar instruction?
• To what extent do traditional learners actually use the structures they have been taught, and how do the frequencies compare to the autonomous group?

• Which structures that had not been introduced by the textbook were used by autonomous learners?

• Which structures that form part of the the regular textbook approach did not occur in the talks of autonomous learners?

4.1 GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY AND FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE

When interpreting the following statistics, we should keep in mind that the text corpus of the traditional group (TG) contains about 46 percent more words. Tests of significance cannot be applied since the two learner groups are not strictly comparable, i.e. there are no external measures of comparability. However, it should be emphasized again that the autonomous learners (AG) form a mixed ability group from a comprehensive school, whereas the German grammar school students have already undergone a certain process of selection which excluded low-ability learners.

Acquisition and use of tense forms

It probably does not come as a surprise that in both learner groups the overriding tense form in the peer-to-peer talks is the PRESENT TENSE. However, when judging the grammatical proficiency of learners after about one and a half years of learning English, adequate handling of PAST, PRESENT PERFECT and forms with future reference is of greater interest. The frequency of occurrence and accuracy rates of these forms will be dealt with in turn. The tables below exclude so-called "echo usage" of tense forms, which could be observed in the interviews when learners just repeated ("echoed") the tense form used in the interviewer's question.

Table 1: PAST TENSE (Full Verbs)

			√		*	
		Totals	f	%	f	%
TG	Regular Verbs	54	29	54	25	46
TG	Irregular Verbs	65	29	45	36	55
AG	Regular Verbs	24	16	67	8	33
AG	Regular Verbs	46	28	61	18	39

√: acceptable forms; *: unacceptable forms
TG: traditional group (German grammar school / Gymnasium)
AG: autonomous group (Danish comprehensive school)

Whereas the overall frequencies of PAST TENSE forms reflect the different corpus sizes, accuracy rates are slightly better for the autonomous group. The unacceptable forms relate to sentences which require a PAST TENSE, but where learners used some other form —PAST TENSE in the majority of cases. The PAST TENSE data for TG derive almost exclusively from the interviews, in which the learners could not avoid these forms since the interviewer asked the questions accordingly. The TG peer-to-peer talks contain only 6 PAST TENSE occurrences —as compared to 31 in the AG data.

The traditional learners avoided irregular full verb forms in the peer-to-peer talks completely —with two exceptions: the forms *rode* and *threw* occurred once, however, with deviant reference to the present time.

Compared to PAST TENSE structures, the forms and functions of the PRESENT PERFECT are much more difficult to acquire.

Table 2: PRESENT PERFECT

	Totals	√		*[INF/PPART]	*[PERF/PAST]	*[PRES; PAST /PERF] etc.
		f	%			
TG	23	0	0	4	12 (⊃ 9 [Inf/Ppart])	7
AG	32	20	62,5	5	2	5

The notations in Table 2 call for some explanatory remarks. The notation *[INF/PPART] characterizes structures as in (1), in which an unmarked INFINITIVE is wrongly used instead of a PAST PARTICIPLE:

(1)   Ehm, have you buy a present for the boy that you're going to live with?
       (A-P, 220)

The notation *[PERF/PAST] refers to contexts in which the PRESENT PERFECT was wrongly used instead of the PAST . In nine out of twelve examples in the TG data the deviant structures additionally lack a PAST PARTICIPLE marker. Cf.

(2)   Yesterday ... we have listen   (T-I, 115)

The distribution of deviant and non-deviant forms across sub-corpora and learner groups is remarkable in many ways. The peer-to-peer talks of traditional learners contain only four cases in which they tried to —and/or had to— construct a PRESENT PERFECT. Cf.

(3)   I play piano one year ago [cf. I have played the piano for one year] (T-P, 243)

This might be interpreted as an avoidance strategy, which has probably got to do with a general uncertainty as to the formation and function of PRESENT TENSE forms. Although the contrast between PRESENT PERFECT and PAST was one of the last major grammatical topics in the textbook prior to the data collection, it seems remarkable that overgeneralized forms of the *[PERF/PAST]-type are among the more frequent deviations (12 occurrences).

Especially when compared to the AG group, the overall frequencies of PRESENT PERFECT structures are surprisingly low in the TG group. In other words, teaching the forms systematically had neither affected frequency of occurrence nor accuracy rates significantly. This in a way corroborates Pienemann's assumption that premature teaching of complex structures might even have detrimental effects on the acquisition process (Pienemann 1987).

In view of the semantic and grammatical complexity of the PRESENT PERFECT, the percentage of correct uses in the AG data is quite astonishing. It should be noted, however, that the majority of correct forms has to be attributed to the more advanced learners of the AG group.

Similar observations can be made as regards the linguistic forms that refer to an event or state in the future. Table 3 gives an overview of structures referring to future time as used by the two learner groups. Echo-occurrences of *be going to*-structures are excluded as well as use of *shall / gonna* in the stereotypical talk opening: "What shall we talk about? / What are we gonna talk about?".

Table 3: Future time reference

	AG					TG				
		√		*			√		*	
	n	f	%	f	%	n	f	%	f	%
be going to	55	40	73	15	27	9	8	89	1	11
gonna	15	8	53	7	47	0	-	-	-	-
will	31	26	84	5	16	14	10	71	4	29
shall	11	6	55	5	45	2	2		0	
EF	15	13	87	2	13	3	2		1	
PRESENT TENSE	23	1	4	22	96	58	3	5	55	95
Should	59	0	0	59	100	0	-	-	-	-
Totals	209	94	45	115	55	86	25	30	61	70

n = number of occurences

The most striking difference between the two learners groups is the total number of references to a state or an event in the future. Although the text corpus is much smaller, the conversational exchanges of the autonomous learners contain two and a half times more future time references. Since a similar tendency, although not quite as pronounced as here, can be observed with PRESENT PERFECT forms, this might be taken as a first indication of different types of communicative interchanges[6]. Some of the distributional differences, however, have to be explained in terms of the two mother tongues involved (cf. *should*-occurrences) or they reflect the syllabus of the TG group.

Thus, neither informal *gonna* nor the PROGRESSIVE or EXPANDED FORM (EF) with future time reference had been introduced by the textbook, which accounts for their absence or low frequencies in the TG group. By contrast, deviant *should*-structures as in (4) are due to Danish mother tongue interference, and cannot be observed in the German learner group. However, it was only the three weakest learners who used *should* in this way - among them student D with 31 deviant forms[7].

(4)   Should you play computer tomorrow? (A-P, 198)

If the deviant *should*-structures of these three learners were subtracted from the statistics, the overall accuracy rate for future time reference would go up to 63 percent, which would compare even more favourably with the 30 percent of the German learner group.

For both corpora the overgeneralization of PRESENT TENSE for future reference (cf. *[PRES/FUT]) is a characteristic feature, since both mother tongues allow that type of construction, which is acceptable in English under certain conditions only. The very fact, however, that this structure accounts for two thirds of all future time references in the TG group (67%) shows the low impact of teaching *will-* and *be going to*-forms. Not only are the forms systematically taught, but also their functional differences are dealt with in detail and they are practised intensively by the German learners.

Another interesting feature in the AG corpus is the distribution of *be going to* versus *gonna*. The higher percentage of errors for *gonna*-structures derives from the fact that some learners have apparently not completely analyzed the form. The following examples point to the opaqueness of the structure:

(5)   If you not gonna skiing, what do you gonna do there? (A-P, 211)
      I would gonna play cards (A-P, 211)

Do-support questions

One of the grammatical core chapters in the beginning years of English is the *do-support question*. The mother tongues of both Danish and German learners form questions by inversion, which implies that the learning difficulty must be regarded as very similar for both groups.

Although overall accuracy figures for questions requiring do-support seem to indicate slightly better results for the traditional group (74 %) than for the autonomous learners (70 %), the figures misrepresent the degree of creative mastery of this structure. The very fact that more than half of the questions requiring do-support in the TG corpus are constructed with the verbs like and live (f = 83) points to the formulaic character of these questions. They are practised intensively in the textbook, and learners seem to have automatized them to a large extent. The accuracy rate for questions with like approaches almost perfect mastery with 98 % in the TG corpus. If questions with like and live are substracted from Table 4, the accuracy rate drops in both corpora, however, much less so in the AG corpus (cf. TG: 74 % => 46 %; AG: 70 % => 63 %).

Table 4: *Do*-support in questions

	Frequencies	Well-formed Questions		Ill-formed Questions	
	n	f	%	f	%
TG	135	100	74	35	26
AG	142	99	70	43	30

Table 5: *do*-support without the verbs *like* and *live*

	Frequencies	Well-formed Questions		Ill-formed Questions	
	n	f	%	f	%
TG	52	24	46	28	54
AG	103	65	63	38	35

It is especially figures as shown in Tables 4 and 5 which cast doubt on the validity of the transfer concept, which the traditional approach so heavily relies on (cf. also Legenhausen 1999).

4.2 STRUCTURES NOT YET COVERED BY THE TG SYLLABUS

Apart from the above mentioned core structures, there are a host of grammatical structures in the AG corpus which had not been taught in the traditional class and, as a consequence, did not occur in their conversations or interviews. These structures are, on the one hand, of paramount interest to syllabus designers since they reflect communicative and linguistic needs of young learners, and on the other hand, they point to the additional learning load that the AG group had already tackled.

Among the more frequent "AG-only" structures are, for example, relative clauses. They occur 36 times with an accuracy rate of 78 %. Hypothetical past tense clauses (*if*-clauses) are attested 16 times (accuracy rate 75%), although they are used by a few advanced learners only. Also the frequency of structures that have undergone *wh*-movement out of prepositional phrases as in (6) is surprising at first glance. Cf.

(6)   What is your / what are yours parents working with? (A-P, 173)
     I have no no friends to play basketball with (A-P, 175)
     I like ah Guns'n Roses, too, and some other groups that I don't know the
     names on (A-P,   187)

It should be mentioned in this context, however, that the Danish mother tongue allows corresponding *wh*-movements. By contrast, complex grammatical forms of the following type are not explainable in terms of cross-linguistic transfer. Both (7) and (8) can be described as having resulted from Raising Transformations, which are likely to imply more complex cognitive processing.

(7)   Do you think that Jacob is nice to stay with in in his house? (A-P, 171)
(8)   He think it stupid. (A-P, 170)

Only a more detailed longitudinal study could actually go into these questions and, for example, try to trace the developmental path of such complex grammatical forms. What a limited corpus of this type seems to show, though, is that —as regards certain structures— learners first come to grips with one or two prototypical forms of that structure, and then, when given the opportunity, start experimenting with that form in other contexts.

The various gerund structures in the AG corpus might be a case in point, and could be interpreted as resulting from hypothesis formation and testing. In both corpora, for example, prototypical gerund formations of the types in (9) and (10) are well-represented - with verbs such as *swim, ride, fish* filling the V-slots:

(9)   My hobbies are V-ing
(10) to go V-ing

However, it is only the AG data which contain a number of additional norm-conforming and deviant gerund structures, which indicate that the learners have be-

gun exploring the alien *ing*-structures even further. Student S, after having mentioned that her hobby was riding, would, for example, come up with *ing*-structures such as in (11-13):

(11) a. Ehm, yesterday I was out in / on riding down in the town (A-I, 63)
　　　b. ["What did you do over the weekend?"] - "I walked out at riding" (A-I, 63)
　　　c. ["What are you going to do today?"] - "I'll back riding" (A-I, 64)

Cf. also:

(12) Have you try skiing before? (A-P, 216)
(13) I don't know if I'm very good at skiing, so ... (A-P, 221)

(14) a. Today was our going down to the [?] (A-P, 185)
　　　b. [Topic: Guns'n Roses] I like the songs and their singing (A-P, 187)

(15) a. But I, I, I don't like to driving in the bus so long time, but ... (A-P, 174)
　　　b. Are you going to skiing down there? (A-P, 212)

(16) a. I would talk to them without they were singing and playing (A-P, 192)
　　　b. without seein' them / see at them (A-P, 202)

If hypothesis formation and testing are crucial to second language acquisition and if, in addition, interlingual variability is a prerequisite for the construction of new knowledge —as many researchers believe—, the data in (11)-(16) would partly explain the overall success of the autonomous learners.

Another observation relates to the last question asked at the beginning of this chapter: Which structures that formed part of the the regular textbook approach did not occur in the talks of autonomous learners, but —we would have to add— were used by the traditional learners? The simple answer is "none". The set of grammatical constructions used by these learners is included in the set of constructions used by autonomous learners. The reverse, however, does not hold.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the data from the limited corpus described above should not be overinterpreted, the following tentative conclusions can be drawn:

• The LAALE data definitely support the view that learners in institutional learning conditions are not only capable of working out the target grammar rules themselves and internalizing them, but —what is more— their grammatical proficiency in communicative interactions compares extremely well with that of traditional, i.e. grammar-instructed, learners. The overall success of their learning endeavours must be seen as a consequence of the principles of autonomous language learning implemented in their classroom.

• Transfer from code-focused exercises to free communicative practice is not as successful as envisaged by designers of traditional language courses. As was shown elsewhere, traditionally taught learners heavily rely on a limited number of memorized and/or automatized structures, which then act as "islands of reliability" in communicative interactions.[8]

• Deliberate instruction of forms does not ensure their accessibility and use in communicative situations. Accuracy rates, especially of more complex grammatical structures such as tenses, do not seem to be a result of systematic teaching. The analysis thus corroborates earlier experimental findings by other researchers.

• In order for learners to fully exploit their language processing abilities, they need to be given ample opportunity for experimenting with linguistic forms in authentic communicative situations. There can be no doubt that a classroom aiming at the implementation of autonomous principles can ensure the authenticity of the interactions to a much greater extent than traditional approaches. By being encouraged and even forced to constantly interact in meaningful ways, autonomous learners develop not only an oral communicative competence but also an astonishingly high degree of grammatical proficiency.

Notes

[1] For further details cf. Breen 1983, Little 1991, Dam 1995.

[2] Cf. L. Dam, personal communication.

[3] A comprehensive description of everyday procedures in an autonomous classroom is provided by Dam 1995.

[4] Beile, W. et al.(1984). *Learning English: Green Line* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1984).

[5] Since there was an unequal number of Danish learners present (N=19) on the day of the recording, two learners did the talks three times. The data collection in the German class took place on two consecutive days —with some of the learners being absent on one of the days. This explains the discrepancy between number of talks and interviews.

[6] For further details as regards the communicative quality of the peer-to-peer talks cf. Legenhausen 1999.

[7] Student D was also extremely weak at writing in his Danish mother tongue, and he attended remedial classes in Danish. In the vocabulary tests we therefore had to allow him to illustrate the meaning of an English word by a drawing instead of writing the L1 translational equivalent. More often than not he made use of this option.

[8] Cf. Legenhausen 1999.

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