

Mobile-assisted language learning and language learner autonomy

Paul A. Lyddon¹

Abstract. In the modern age of exponential knowledge growth and accelerating technological development, the need to engage in lifelong learning is becoming increasingly urgent. Successful lifelong learning, in turn, requires learner autonomy, or “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 58), including all relevant decisions about what, when, where, and how to learn. Mobile technologies, as not only potential means for learning anywhere and anytime but also conduits to rich, multimodal content, provide unprecedented opportunities for the development of learner autonomy. However, even when learners possess adequate training in mobile technology use and autonomy itself, implementation of mobile learning devices in the classroom often seems to engender little additional autonomous behavior. This paper highlights the differing constraints on learner autonomy in formal and informal learning environments. It then proposes an approach to encouraging greater demonstration of autonomy through an explicit linking of institutional requirements associated with routine lesson assignments and the achievement of personally meaningful, individually determined learning goals. Finally, it suggests the role that mobile technology can and properly ought to play in capacitating consistently high levels of demonstrated autonomy both inside and outside the classroom.

Keywords: lifelong learning, mobile technology, learner training, learning context.

1. Introduction

As the rate of technological advancement continues to accelerate, the exponential growth and rapid dissemination of new knowledge now makes many traditional academic courses of study out-of-date almost as soon as they reach completion. As such, lifelong learning can no longer be considered the recreation of an exceptional

1. Osaka Jogakuin College, Osaka, Japan; lyddon@wilmina.ac.jp

How to cite this article: Lyddon, P. A. (2016). Mobile-assisted language learning and language learner autonomy. In S. Papadima-Sophocleous, L. Bradley, & S. Thoučšny (Eds), *CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016* (pp. 302-306). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.eurocall2016.579>

few who happen to possess the necessary resources and disposition, but an absolute imperative for all who wish to be gainfully employed for the duration of their working years. For lifelong learning to be successful, however, learners need to possess a high degree of autonomy, in other words, the capacity to take control of their own learning (Benson, 2011, p. 58). This capacity includes determining learning objectives, defining scope and sequence, selecting methods and techniques, setting locations and schedules, and evaluating outcomes (Holec, 1981).

The invention and spread of Internet-capable mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers has certainly opened up new possibilities in terms of learner autonomy by providing not only a potential means of learning anytime and anywhere, but also access to a virtually endless variety of rich, multimodal content. However, a means in itself is insufficient. At a minimum, it also requires the ability to use it. Consequently, countless learner training programs have now been put in place, and many of these include mobile technologies as a key component.

Possession of mobile learning devices and demonstrated ability to create and successfully complete individualized learning plans entailing their use outside of class notwithstanding, learners often fail to exhibit similar levels of autonomy inside the classroom. For instance, in an activity where a simple image search might help them either understand or express an essential concept during a class discussion, they inexplicably choose instead to flounder. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a plausible reason for the inconsistent display of autonomous behavior between formal and informal contexts and to propose an approach to rectifying this apparent discrepancy.

2. Background

Though their exact origins are difficult to pinpoint, discussions of autonomy in education greatly intensified in the wake of the social and political turmoil immediately following World War II (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). By the early 1970s, initiatives such as the Council of Europe's Modern Language Project had emerged to provide opportunities and support for lifelong learning so as to nurture individuals' abilities to responsibly participate in the affairs of modern society (Benson, 2011). Given the rapid pace of technological change in the current digital age, the need for learner autonomy is now crucial, for students must now be prepared for "jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet" (mesjms, 2016).

The adoption of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers has largely eased restrictions on where and when learners can learn as well as introduced a host of previously unavailable options in terms of modality and content. Moreover, inasmuch as they are technological artifacts, these devices might even be qualified as extensions of our mental and physical faculties (Brey, 2000). Just as glasses improve our ability to see, smartphones and tablets have the potential to help us observe and recall things better, fill gaps in our knowledge, and enhance our ability to communicate. As such, with the inclusion of training on how to take advantage of them in learner training programs, these powerful technologies should additionally lead to greater learner autonomy. However, the results are not always consistent, and the question is why.

3. Discussion

True learner autonomy, in the sense of self-determination, would include not only what, where, when, and how to learn, but whether to learn at all. While it is true that students cannot choose whether to learn if they do not know how, it must also be admitted that most formal language learning is compulsory and that many students might indeed opt out if given the choice. Despite the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR)'s explicit acknowledgment of the importance of learner autonomy, the Council of Europe (2014) explains the framework's overall purpose as "to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency" (para. 1). In other words, learners are not, in fact, free to simply learn whatever they like, at least not if they wish to meet international program standards.

Learner autonomy in most formal learning contexts is limited in a number of other important ways as well. Among the most evident are time and place, ironically the two constraints that mobile technologies are touted to overcome. Perhaps the most serious additional impediment of formal learning contexts with respect to learner autonomy, however, is that of tool use itself. While no teacher would likely prohibit students from wearing glasses in class, it is largely because the intended purpose of glasses is clear and the potential for its perversion is slight. The purpose of versatile tools such as mobile devices, on the other hand, is ambiguous and, thus, invites misuse in the form of off-task student behaviors. Thus, it is for this reason, I would argue, that many instructors do not allow the use of mobile devices in their classrooms. Moreover, the mindset of formal schooling is so strong that

even in classrooms where teachers do not expressly prohibit their use, students are conditioned to assume prohibition unless explicitly told otherwise. Consequently, despite having the means and ability, they fail to demonstrate autonomy out of a perceived denial of permission.

Not to challenge the notion of standards-based education, I simply wish to acknowledge the constraints of formal learning contexts and suggest a way of working within them. In any context, learner autonomy consists more of interdependence than independence, but especially in a formal context, I would contend that autonomous learners should possess the following five characteristics: *compliance*, *competence*, *cognizance*, *introspection*, and *diplomacy*.

These five characteristics can be imagined on a horizontal cline, with increasingly autonomous learners exhibiting more of them from left to right. The least autonomous students are non-compliant, that is, they choose not to participate in assigned learning activities. Those who are *compliant* but incompetent participate but may not follow the prescribed requirements out of lack of understanding and failure to seek clarification. Those who are only additionally *competent* follow the assignment directions to the letter while sometimes awkwardly violating the intended pedagogical purpose. Those who are additionally *cognizant* also understand the teacher's rationale, those who are *introspective* can see the personal value of the assignment, and those who are *diplomatic* can negotiate task completion accordingly.

After clearly highlighting to students the necessarily limited nature of learner autonomy in the formal learning context, the first step in developing it is to inculcate these expected characteristics, for instance by engaging learners in regular self-reflection on their level of conscious involvement in the completion of required learning assignments. It is only at this point that the role of mobile technology in bolstering learner autonomy can truly be addressed, for only then can students begin to see the value of the technology in helping them to achieve their personal goals, understand how use of the technology is consistent with instructional, institutional, or societal goals, and use the technology conscientiously to mediate these two sometimes competing ends.

4. Conclusion

As technological artifacts can be considered extensions of our physical and mental faculties, mobile technologies open up promising new possibilities in terms of the

exercise of learner autonomy. However, compulsory learning in formal contexts may inhibit their full exploitation in the classroom. To help learners overcome their inhibition, teachers should explicitly acknowledge the limited nature of autonomy in formal learning contexts and inculcate expectations of learner characteristics aimed at linking the institutional requirements associated with routine lesson assignments to the achievement of personally meaningful, individually determined learning goals. Finally, they should encourage the development of a new type of self-awareness and self-discipline that embodies mobile technologies and, thus, enables them to be effectively employed to further this purpose.

References

- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy* (2nd ed.). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Brey, P. (2000). Theories of technology as extension of human faculties. In C. Mitcham (Ed.), *Metaphysics, epistemology, and technology: research in philosophy and technology*, vol. 19 (pp. 59-78). London, UK: Elsevier/JAI Press.
- Council of Europe. (2014). *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)*. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp
- Gremmo, M.-J., & Riley, P. (1995). Autonomy, self-direction and self-access in language teaching and learning: the history of an idea. *System*, 23(2), 151-164. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(95\)00002-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(95)00002-2)
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- mesjms. (2016, January 18). Did you know 2016 [Video file]. <https://youtu.be/uqZiIO0YI7Y>

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

© 2016 by Editors (collective work)
© 2016 by Authors (individual work)

CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016
Edited by Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouéšny

Rights: All articles in this collection are published under the Attribution-NonCommercial -NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Under this licence, the contents are freely available online as PDF files (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.EUROCALL2016.9781908416445>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.



Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Easy Conferences, info@easyconferences.eu, www.easyconferences.eu
Cover layout by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Photo "bridge" on cover by © Andriy Markov/Shutterstock
Photo "frog" on cover by © Fany Savina (fany.savina@gmail.com)
Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-43-8 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-44-5 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-45-2 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2016.