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Re-placing the Jewel in the Crown of Autonomy: A Revisiting of the ‘Self’ or ‘Selves’ in Self-Access

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Abstract

While self-access resources enjoyed a wave of popularity in the 1980s and early 1990s and like the language labs of previous decades saw considerable financial investment in terms of space, materials, equipment and teacher commitment, with the coming of the Internet and other technologies, there seems to have been less rather than more concern for Self-access Language Learning (SALL).

This seeming decline of interest in SALL has, somewhat paradoxically, been accompanied by what seems to be a surge of interest in autonomy and examination of the many ways that autonomy can be promoted in language learning. Rather than clarifying the relationship between self-access and autonomy, it may have become more blurred and indistinct.

The author outlines four elements, involving strategic learning, which she believes to be essential in the promotion of autonomy and then briefly discusses the ‘self’ or ‘selves’, or internal resources which learners must ‘access’ if they are to succeed in an autonomous or self-access mode and improve their learning.

Viewed in these wider terms of strategically accessing both internal and external resources, self-access takes on a whole new significance and, indeed, can be returned to its rightful place as the ‘jewel’ in the ‘crown’ that is autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, self-access, strategic learning, SALL, ownership of learning

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, with the decline of the language labs, which had been costly in terms of installation, materials, time and personnel, came the rise of the so-called self-access centres, which had the advantage that they could be tailor-made and developed with a degree of sophistication to suit the particular needs and budget of the institution and language-learning setting. In the U.K., the concept was promoted by what could be called British Council ‘pioneers’, like Jim Kerr, Marion Geddes, Gill Sturtridge and Diana Basterfield (British Council, 1977). In turn, larger language education enterprises with many branches in the South of England developed state-of-the-art facilities which became showcases for what could be

achieved with a variety of both ready-made and in-house materials. Unlike the labs, there was emphasis on the fact that self-access was not restricted by geography or lack of affluence, and that with truly ‘resourceful’ managers it was possible to create resources anywhere, including in a kitchen complete with sink (Hay, 1992)!

Beyond the shores of the U.K., the British Council extended its pioneering of self-access to its Direct Teaching Operations worldwide, with Barcelona, Quito, Hong Kong, Cairo, Mexico, and, on a smaller scale, Thessaloniki, enjoying particular success. These depended, of course, on locally-deployed managers taking the initiative and making rather daring decisions, but more particularly was due to the enthusiasm and commitment of both teachers and administrative staff and their oft-times heroic efforts (Reinders, 2012). Thus, the significance of autonomy in language learning and the philosophy behind self-access as a concept became important and were frequently rationalised, with Littlewood (1997, p. 80) somewhat prophetically asserting that “self-access needs to be guided by a theoretical framework which justifies its existence”.

The delay in finding a satisfactory framework may be due, in part, to delays in other relevant fields of study, with Rose (2012a, p. 97), in his examination of strategy and self-regulation theory, calling for a “new model of strategic learning to emerge”. Rose (2012b) sees clear connections between strategic learning and SALL and sees great potential for examination of these connections. The connections that will be examined in the present article will be based on Chamot’s (2012) simple definition of learning strategies as “efforts made by students to learn” and on Tseng, Dornyei and Schmitt’s (2006, p. 81) conclusion that “it is not what learners do that make them strategic learners”, but rather the “creative effort” that is involved in order to “improve their own learning”.

With reference to a Self-access Language Learning research project called Mentoring for Self-access Language Learning (MENSALL), conducted between 2008-2010 in the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which involved peer mentoring for Self-access Language Learning, the author will seek to re-examine the ‘self’ in self-access, previously examined by Murray (2011) and Reinders and Lewis (2005), and see, if held up for examination and viewed in a slightly different light, it may be possible to return the concept of self-access to its rightful place as the jewel in the crown of autonomy.

Defining and Refining SALL

The origins of the term ‘self-access’ remain something of a mystery and proffered definitions of self-access have tended to place emphasis on access to materials and resources rather than on ‘access’ to the ‘self’. Indeed, many of those actually involved in managing SALL resources (this author included) have actively promoted the same emphasis (Gardner, 2011; Murray, 2011; Reinders & Lewis, 2005); consequently, such approaches resulted in the term ‘self-access’ appearing to be something of a misnomer. It was perhaps also due to the fact that at this point in time there was much discussion of ‘self-instruction’ that there was the not unreasonable assumption that students using such resources would work alone. The other natural assumption which may have contributed to the ‘tarnishing’ of the reputation of self-access was the idea that materials and resources should be housed within a room, part of a room, or even a whole suite of rooms, like a “walled garden” (Reinders, 2012). It could well be that this predominant focussing on the ‘access’, as Murray (2011) puts it, or the organisation and management of self-access or resource centre collections, has landed SALL in what Reinders (2012) sees as a rather ‘dangerous’ yet not altogether warranted predicament.

Kelly (1996) recognised long ago, like many other researchers, that “a self-access centre does not in itself enable learners to become self-directed” (pp. 93-94) and that learning in self-access mode requires “considerable transformation of their beliefs about language and their role as learners” which can only be achieved through a “process of reorientation and personal discovery”. Hounsell (1979) also believes that “a shift from other- to self-directed learning involves the learner in changes not only in methods but, more fundamentally in his perception of himself and his relationship to the world around him” (p. 465). Indeed, Breen and Mann (1997, p. 134) dispute the idea of language learning as a process, following particular rules or strategies, but rather see autonomy as “a *way of being* in the world; a *position from which to engage* with the world” (authors’ emphasis) and that to be able to do that requires that learners have “a robust sense of self”. They also dispute the commonly-held perception of autonomy as an ‘ability’, and, rather, regard it as “a way of being that has to be discovered or rediscovered”.

In this article, like Murray (2011), I state the case for the importance of placing emphasis on the ‘self’ and the accessing of that ‘self’ and all of that self’s

potential for learning, so that self-access language learning can benefit “[a]ll learners” (Gardner and Miller, 1999, p. 64) and, as Kelly (1996) points out, this will require much more than just “technology and the right configuration of resources” (p. 93), if learners are to be able to “make use of the environment they find themselves in in a strategic way” (Breen & Mann, 1997, p. 135).

To come to a better understanding of what self-access in its ‘purest’ sense might mean, we need look no further than the educational psychologist Gibbs (1979), who believes that “an autonomous individual must have both independence from external authority and mastery of himself and his powers” (p. 119). In the same vein, Allwright (1990, p. 1) regards autonomy as “a state of optimal equilibrium between dependence and self-sufficiency” where “the individual has developed his or her own inner resources to the full” but at the same time has recourse to “external resources” which he or she knows how to select and use to maximum advantage, without disadvantaging others or “compromising his or her autonomy”, the latter also being recognised as a real danger by Breen & Mann (1997), Deci and Ryan (1995) and Schmenk (2008). The “equilibrium” to which Allwright (1990, p. 10) refers involves finding the balance between “both inner and external resources, both human and material resources, both cognitive and affective domains, and both the individual and the social aspects of both domains”. This would seem to be the idea of self-access that Murray (2011) is trying to encapsulate when he pleads the case for metacognition and imagination and it also seems to offer parameters within which Tseng et al.’s (2006) idea of strategic learning could be applied effectively.

Faking Autonomy in Language Learning

Previously, the idea of learners possibly compromising their autonomy was touched upon. While it might seem hard to believe that students, rather than working towards autonomy, might choose to feign the behaviours of an autonomous learner, Breen & Mann (1997, p. 141) suggest that in order to please the teacher, having discovered what behaviours the teacher might like to see in her learners as evidence of autonomy, it is altogether likely that “learners will give up their autonomy to put on the mask of autonomous behaviour”, a practice which Schmenk (2006, p. 82) also recognises and refers to as “façading”. Schmenk (ibid) feels that the danger of identifying particular behaviours as evidence of autonomy is particularly likely to

occur in a self-access setting, where students are interacting with computers and other devices, so that on the surface they appear to be acting autonomously. Schmenk (2008, p. 101) also warns us of the dangers of trivialising autonomy and of reductionist approaches to promoting autonomy which result in what she calls “*autonomy lite*” (author’s emphasis), but, equally well, she warns of its over-idealisation and of the very real dangers of its “globalization” and “McDonaldization” (Schmenk, 2005, p. 111). It could be argued that such dangers are all the more prevalent in the case of self-access.

Like Breen & Mann (*ibid*), Deci & Ryan (1995, p. 33) believe that someone might feel obliged to give up their autonomy and their “true sense of self” in order to take on a “socially implanted self”. This is because they do not enjoy “true self-esteem”, but rather a form of “contingent self-esteem” in which their feelings of self-worth depend on the evaluation and praise of others, whose standards they have adopted. Deci & Ryan (1995, p. 36) also stipulate that “only autonomous actions emanate from one’s true sense of self”.

Not only is there the danger of our learners faking autonomy, but even if their autonomy is genuine, according to McNair (1997), cited in Hughes (2003), there is a real danger that if learners in Higher Education continue to learn in the same way as previously, that they may actually become less autonomous. This is partly attributable to the fact that approaches to teaching and testing in Higher Education can often promote ‘surface’ approaches to learning, involving memorisation, rather than ‘deep’ approaches, where learning is retained.

The Essential Elements of Autonomy

Just as self-access has been hindered to some extent by the focus on physical rather than cognitive resources, in the same way, it could be claimed that autonomy has suffered from eager attempts to implement and promote it, without too much rationalising about the strategic elements which constitute autonomous behaviour, particularly in a language-learning setting. Here I will briefly discuss what seem to be four essential constituents of autonomy, as revealed by a review of the autonomy literature (Everhard-Theophilidou, 2012):

1) Identity

Little (1999) reminds us that language learning “has profound implications for our behavioural potential” (p. 31) and that there is necessarily a link with “our sense of self, our sense of identity”. Doughty and Thornton (1973) emphasise how closely and intimately our sense of being and identity are linked to our ability to use language, positing that “our view of the world is inseparable from the way we use language to shape it” (p. 41). Imhoof (1991) seems to take this idea a step further when he states that “it is a step towards reshaping our lives” (p. 40). We are creating a new person with a new language. ...language learning requires the student to take on a new identity.” The link between language and identity is also reiterated by Williams and Burden (1997), with language being used to “convey this identity to other people” (p. 115). Brown (1973) highlights the fact that “communication implies a process of revealing oneself to another” (pp. 233-234) which is not easy, particularly when these revelations are in a foreign language.

Many researchers emphasise the link between identity and agency and the importance in autonomy of developing an agentic self and becoming a ‘producer’ of society, rather than just a ‘product’ of it (Macaro, 1997, p. 168), or, as Pennycook (1997) puts it, “an author of one’s world” (p. 45). For an interestingly detailed and socio-anthropological analysis of ‘self’, ‘identity’ and ‘personhood’, see Riley (2003).

2) Reflection

Little (1999) states the interesting proposition that schooling should provide learners with knowledge, but at the same time equip them with the critical ability to question that same schooling. He strongly believes that learners should be able to use the foreign language as a tool for reflection and should be provided with opportunities both for reflection and self-assessment. Little (1999) considers that reflection entails “learner initiative” (p. 6) and when there is “learner initiative”, there is the beginning of learner control. For him, reflection “necessarily entails self-assessment”.

Dam and Little (1998) view learning as a cyclical process of planning, implementation and evaluation, with reflection at the centre, not just of language learning, but of learning in general. By developing this capacity, we are enabling learners to acquire a skill which can be applied in “other domains of life”, but it is a skill which can only be developed “gradually, on the basis of practice” (Dam & Little, 1998, p. 130).

Interestingly, Huttunen (2003) sees reflection working on the different levels of 1) Mechanical; 2) Pragmatic and 3) Emancipatory. She has based these three levels on Habermas's three "knowledge-constitutive interests" and he, in turn, based his "interests" on Aristotle's three dispositions of human behaviour. At the Mechanical level, learners simply take facts on board without attending to their relevance or linking them to past knowledge and experience. At the Pragmatic level, the learner has an increased understanding of facts, due to an action or as a result of it, but is unable to analyse them further or relate them to experience. At the Emancipatory level, however, the learner gets a new perspective on things and gains fresh insights, while "engaging in reflection". Connections are made with previous knowledge and experience and reasons are sought for actions and outcomes of actions (Huttunen, 2003).

Jiménez Raya (2006) also believes that reflection is critical to the development of autonomy since ideas are "brought to consciousness" (p. 127). This enables the learner to consider an idea or problem from the perspective of an "outsider", so that the learner becomes "his own critic" and can identify "weak spots". Cotterall (2000) views autonomy as growing in direct relation to an individual's "learning awareness" (p. 112). Without reflection, she believes that learners cannot look back and assess the progress of their learning and neither can they modify their actions nor look forward and make plans for future learning activities.

3) Ownership

Questions of ownership both of learning and of the foreign language would seem to be fundamental to the promotion of autonomy and yet they are rarely discussed in depth. Ownership is perhaps a complex area to deal with because it brings in questions of learners' acceptance of the foreign language, the processes of acculturation, as well as a number of affective factors.

Kohonen (2001, p. 34) believes that very useful discussions can be formulated, both from a political standpoint, in terms of the "power relationships between teachers and learners" and from the way that learners view their language learning experiences, as well as "the world around them". Learning can only be meaningful if placed in a context where learners are able to "construct and interpret" it. For Kohonen, ownership also poses questions on an "emotional" level of who, in the learning situation, has the right or the responsibility to plan and take decisions. This

would all depend on how much learners feel that they have responsibility to make choices, take control or take the initiative. Kohonen sees ownership as being on a spectrum or continuum with teacher ownership progressing to shared ownership, with the possibility of moving on to learner ownership. Kohonen takes pains to stress that because greater ownership might be assumed by learners, this does not necessarily mean that teachers then take a back seat in the learning process. Rather, in order for learners to be able to take greater responsibility for their learning, there necessarily has to be a “careful balance between learner control and teacher support and feedback”.

Crabbe (1999) asserts that the key to improvement of individual performance, whether of teaching or learning, is a greater sense of power and ownership, which will be “driven by an exploratory attitude and working within a curricular framework that is flexible and dynamic enough for individual explorations” (p. 141). Likewise, Reinders (2010) sees the promotion of learner autonomy as being not just the developing of particular skills, but, rather, requires “developing a certain mind-set that sees learning as an active process of discovery” (p. 52). If learners realise that they are valued and supported, they will be more likely to adopt this mind-set and teachers will regard learners’ ownership of the learning process as being important.

Regarding ownership of the language itself, Dufeu (1994) asserts that “language cannot be separated from its use” (p. 7). Language users or “participants” can adopt the foreign language and “integrate it so well that it becomes their own”. Because of this “direct contact” and ownership of the language, it no longer seems “foreign”.

Thus, moves towards autonomy help promote ownership of learning, which becomes more meaningful and, at the same time, promotes ownership of the language, which takes on personal significance. In the case of self-access, it could be said that ownership will also extend to resources, both internal and external.

4) Self-determination

Closely linked to the concept of identity is that of self-determination. Identity has more to do with a way of being and acting in the world. Self-determination is more concerned with a learner’s self-image or self-concept which is based on feedback received within the learning environment and the world at large and how (s)he decides to act based on that. Williams & Burden (1997) stipulate that the views of the world that individuals hold, have an influence on their self-concept, while,

equally well, their self-concepts affect their way of viewing the world. It is the combination of these views which will determine the learner's success in learning.

Ryan and Deci (2000) see self-determination as being on a continuum, with autonomy fluctuating depending on the degree of self-determination of the learner. At the one end of the continuum is non-self-determined behaviour signified by amotivation and non-regulation, where learners act non-intentionally, are non-valuing, incompetent, and lack control, and the locus of causality is impersonal, while at the other extreme where individuals are self-determining, there is intrinsic motivation and intrinsic regulation with behaviour which displays interest, enjoyment and inherent satisfaction and the locus of causality is perceived as internal.

Clearly, a person who constantly requires reassurance as to their abilities has "contingent" self-esteem, while someone with "true" self-esteem is not so affected by the ups and downs of successes and failures, "acting agentically" from their "integrated self", while someone with "contingent" self-esteem will be more affected by comparison with external and "socially imposed standards" (Deci & Ryan, 1995, p. 35). In their self-determination theory, Deci & Ryan (1995) assert that "being autonomous is both an input to and a manifestation of the development of an integrated self and true self-esteem", so that "to the degree that individuals have attained a sense of self, they can act in accord with or be 'true' to that self" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 3).

It becomes clear that there is not just one self involved as the individual strives towards autonomy through SALL, but rather a whole range of competences or aspects of the self, which must become part of the learner's repertoire and identity if they are to succeed in language learning. Amongst those 'selves' are our previously-mentioned self-esteem and self-determination, as well as self-direction, self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-assessment, self-monitoring, and the list goes on.

The MENSALL Research Project and what it Uncovered

Some of our most interesting research discoveries can be made by chance and thus it was in my own case with the Mentoring for Self-access Language Learning (MENSALL) project, 2008-2010, in the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. In this project, 3rd Year EFL students on an Applied Linguistics course concerned with Self-access and Foreign Language Learning were teamed up with 1st

Year students attending a 2nd semester Language Mastery course whom they would mentor with a view to overcoming particular language or learning difficulties by working in self-access mode. Although I have always worked hard to convince students that working in self-access mode does not require that we have a Self-access Centre (SAC), it became very clear to them and to me, due to limited access to self-access facilities, constrictions due to timetabling clashes between Mentors and Mentees, and sometimes even geographical distance, that this was very much the case. Mentors and Mentees could communicate by e-mail, by telephone or by mobile texting. They could meet in their respective homes, in the Departmental Library, the Faculty Cafeteria, the Resource Centre, Computer Lab, or anywhere else of their choosing as long as the mentoring and meeting of the challenges involved in the mentoring process were accomplished.

This demanded the bringing to the fore and exercising of many of the constituents of autonomy and many of the ‘selves’ listed above, with learners gaining mastery not only over the learning and language problems they had identified, but, even more importantly, greater mastery of themselves (Gibbs, 1979) through the development of a more “robust sense of self” (Breen & Mann, 1997, p. 139). There was clear evidence, not only of “efforts” (Chamot, 2012) being made to learn, but “creative effort” (Tseng et al., 2006, p. 81) which was not confined within the limits of the very small “walled garden” available to them (Reinders, 2012) or by any of the other constraints they encountered. There was the realisation by all parties that SALL is not something which need be restricted by time or place.

Without them even being aware of it, students were putting Vygotsky’s neo-constructivist principles into practice, with the older students providing the necessary scaffolding for the younger students to reach the next stage in the learning process. It is true that there could have been some ‘faking’ of autonomy going on, but the overall impression from questionnaire feedback was of a mutually enriching experience, where internal resources on both sides had raised their awareness of how external resources could help them strengthen and build on their knowledge and trust within their small community of practice. It should be mentioned that Mentor-Mentee relationships were not only one-to-one. Many and any combination(s) of Mentors and Mentees was/were possible (though not usually more than 4 in either case), depending on how the Mentees and Mentors themselves had chosen to cluster together to suit their needs and learning styles and depending on overall demand for Mentors.

Conclusion

Although there is much still to be explored and examined concerning autonomy in language learning and how it can be promoted through SALL, it seems clear that SALL would be encouraged and exploited to a much greater degree than it is at present if old prejudices concerning its supposed drawbacks and limitations could be discarded and if the connections between strategic learning and SALL could become the subject of greater scrutiny. What needs to be given emphasis from hereon is the importance of the Self, or, more likely, the multiple Selves, which can be developed and helped to flourish through working in a strategic way in Self-access mode. Looked at in this way, the much wider possibilities and implications of SALL will become apparent. Self-access will take the place it so rightly deserves as the jewel in the crown of autonomy, but not a crown to be worn only by the rich and privileged, but one that, with a little bit of wisdom, is available to all people in all places.

Notes on the contributor

Carol J. Everhard, an independent researcher, was formerly a teaching fellow in the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. Her interests lie in the means that can be used to promote autonomy in foreign language learning. She was Coordinator of the IATEFL Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group between 2006 and 2008.

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