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Book review: Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching: New Research Agendas edited by Alice Chik, Naoko Aoki and Richard Smith

Gamze A. Sayram, Macquarie University ELC, Australia

This edited collection of research studies makes an important theoretical and practical contribution to the literature by illustrating the expanding dimensions of autonomous language learning and teaching, deepening our conceptualization of the pedagogical norms and approaches, proposing new research scopes, contexts and settings for future research.

In Chapter 1, the editors, *Alice Chik, Naoko Aoki and Richard Smith*, set the stage for a comprehensive analysis and resourceful outlook to explore new research agendas on autonomy in language teaching and learning. According to Chik, learner autonomy in language learning and teaching, as a field, is moving into different directions and dimensions, since the last four decades. She explores autonomy in language learning and teaching taking a step further from Benson's (2011) description of learner autonomy, "the capacity to take control of one's learning" (p. 58). From this definition, further questions arise, such as: "Who is taking control? From whom? What types of control? When do learners exercise control? What places and spaces do learners take control of?" Answering these questions of who, what, when, where, why, leads to further explorations of the new agendas and dimensions of autonomy in language learning and teaching; therefore, this book serves as a valuable resource for those who are interested in examining these perspectives in more depth.

In Chapter 2, *Learner Autonomy in Developing Countries*, *Richard Smith, Kuchah Kuchah and Martin Lamb* discuss the practice and relevance of learner autonomy in developing countries and illustrate three main priorities to achieve pedagogies of autonomy. The priority is to focus on the affordances of mobile technology and other types of technology to access the Internet in out-of-class settings to promote learner autonomy. They discuss the difficulties learners face in developing countries and how engaging and developing learner autonomy can help in taking control of one's learning by illustrating examples from Indonesia, Cameroon and India. The second priority is building a bottom-up approach, especially in low-resource environments, to promote and develop social autonomy among learners. The third approach is to engage teachers and learners in research and enable them to express their agency and voice. The question arises as to whether greater engagement

of teacher and learner autonomy could contribute to the overall development of these developing countries. There are rather limited studies focusing on language learner and teacher autonomy, specifically in underprivileged or developing countries; therefore, further investigation in this area would be valuable.

In Chapter 3, *Language Teacher Autonomy and Social Censure*, Xuesong Gao touches on a rather sensitive topic or concern about teacher autonomy and the constraints teachers face. Although teacher autonomy is central to promoting autonomy among students, it is often neglected and undermined. In this study, collected narratives from teachers in mainland China and Hong Kong are examined to find out how they address the challenges of social censure they experience. As these societies have become increasingly materialistic and the education system has become decentralized, teachers are facing bureaucratic control as well as educational consumers' critical control. For these reasons, they are often faced with public scrutiny, weakened professional authority and position, which results in their feeling vulnerable. They are often micromanaged and have little say. Numerous researchers have stressed that teachers should have freedom to express and reflect on their professional practices, pedagogical agendas, observe professional practices and determine professional development areas (e.g. Benson 2010, Smith 2003). Gao suggests possible ways forward, such as engaging in initiatives in the form of *RICH* programs (*Researched-based study, Integrative curriculum, Community learning and Humanistic outcome*). These programs promote professional supportive communities and guidance, in order to reinforce positive processes and conditions for teachers to exercise their autonomy. Finally, he suggests that there is a need for further research to collect teachers' narratives and deconstruct their issues, so that they can prepare themselves for challenges and pursue their autonomy in teaching and researching.

In Chapter 4, *Learner Autonomy and Groups*, David Palfreyman examines the dynamic relationship between learner autonomy and group work, to better understand how they work together as a pedagogy in teaching and learning practice. He looks at this interwoven network from different perspectives, such as fitting in, engagement with communities of practice, interdependence, co-regulated learning, cooperative learning, group work and group culture, collegiality, learning communities and creation of collective knowledge. He stated that these are highly valued 'soft skills' which combine diversity of approaches and perspectives that became the explicit goal of education in the new era. He suggests a range of research methods including learning logs, digital environments, self-reports, observations, interviews, stimulated recall or think aloud protocols as a form of

‘traceable data’ to examine these reciprocal relationships, learner and group autonomy dynamics over time, space and context.

In Chapter 5, *Learner Autonomy and Digital Practices* are explored by *Alice Chik*. With a new interest in learner autonomy and digital practices, Chik examines the affordances and constraints of language learning beyond the classroom through five interconnected dimensions. These are location, formality, pedagogy, locus of control and trajectory. She illustrates how learners’ engagement with digital practices may link to the development of learner autonomy and language learning beyond the classroom. Among the infinite number of digital practices and resources, many language learners prefer to transform their out-of-class learning experiences into meaningful learning opportunities (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Jones, R. H., Chik, A., & Hafner, C. A., 2015) by engaging in them and making them part of their lives. In doing so, they become better at controlling their learning processes, because they can direct their attention to developing metacognitive strategies, such as planning, strategy development, concentration, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. In this study, the author took an auto-ethnographic approach. In 2013, she enrolled in a language learning platform, *Duolingo*, to learn one of the many languages offered, in order to map out the digital practices associated with her individual learning experiences and examined these through the above mentioned five dimensions. She found that this model provided a systematic way to examine the relationship between digital practices and autonomous language learning beyond the classroom, helping to develop reflective understanding of one’s own learning needs. Finally, she concluded that these digital practices could be conceptualized as ‘door openers’ (Bruner, 1996) to further understand language learning beyond the classroom with a new insight.

In Chapter 6, *Researching the Spatial Dimensions of Learner Autonomy*, *Garold Murray* shares his findings of a five-year longitudinal ethnographic inquiry, observing the social learning spaces in a language center in a Japanese university. He examines how learners define what a learning space is, how their concepts transform into a learning place, and what actions they take. Specifically, he observes the microenvironments of the linguistic landscapes learners have constructed, how these environments provide space and freedom to exercise their agency, offering more choices and options to choose the venue, layout, colour and design their own unique learning spaces, which appeal to their imagination and develop their language learning identity. These spaces provide the conditions for creative social practices, where learners imagine becoming foreign language speakers and envisage their future selves. In these spaces, there is continuous movement and engagement, which

illustrates the interconnectedness of the time-space relationship learners have created for language learning. These observations provide various themes for future research with different approaches and methodologies in the study of student led, creative, interactive, social language learning spaces.

This book is as a valuable resource for students, teachers, researchers, scholars, academia and administrators who are interested in exploring and developing new approaches and perspectives about autonomy in language learning and teaching. It makes significant contributions to the field with its broad range of contexts and illustrates a variety of platforms, linguistic landscapes and spaces which provide richness in scope and depth in researching autonomous language learning and teaching. Particularly, Gao's collective teacher narratives draws attention to the complex circumstances and dynamics teachers are facing, in order to remain independent and autonomous educators. Ultimately, there is an urgent need for further research in this area to support teachers and their freedom of expression to raise the quality of autonomous language learning and teaching in education.

This resourceful book also serves as a guide, especially for researchers who would like to expand their approaches and terrains for further investigation, in order to find answers to specific micro and macro-interrelated dynamics, relationships and stimulants in autonomous language learning and teaching. As a well-written and thought-provoking book, it sets the next stage for learner autonomy research. It is recommended for everyone who is interested in exploring more terrains about autonomy in language learning and teaching. These new research agendas open doors to new worlds, and I feel grateful to be able to read it, as it resonates with my own interests and practices.

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