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Reflections on the 7th RILAE LAb Session

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Abstract

This paper reports on the 7th LAb Session hosted online by the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) on December 3rd, 2021. This LAb session featured 19 presenters, including three invited speakers, from 8 different countries to explore the concepts of autonomy and learner agency. The presenters shared short summaries of research, theoretical conceptualisations and descriptions of practice centered around the theme. Pre-recorded sessions were made available to attendees the day prior, while the live sessions were broken into a morning and afternoon session. This article provides a broad summary of the presentations and my reflections as a first time co-organiser

Keywords: advising in language learning, peer advising, advising tools, small group advising, peer advisor training

The stated aims of the LAb Sessions centres around facilitating an exchange of autonomy research and best practice within the global language education community. Our latest event, held on December 3rd, achieved those stated aims by not only featuring presenters from eight different locations around the world including the UK, Spain, Uruguay, Japan, Trinidad and Tobago, Australia, Mexico and Italy, but by also hosting attendees from Brazil to Hong Kong and all the way to France. My involvement with the LAb sessions has grown unexpectedly since first attending in November, 2018 for the 3rd LAb Session. At first, I was a silent attendee drinking in the knowledge brought forth by my more experienced peers. Then for the 6th LAb Session, I had the privilege to interview Phil Benson on his new book ‘Language Learning Environments: Spatial Perspectives on SLA’ (Multilingual Matters) with my colleague, Phillip Bennett. It was an opportunity that I am thankful for - it pushed me to think on my feet and respond in the moment. In a way, co-organising the LAb Session was more familiar ground for me, but ground from which new insights and professional relationships blossomed.

The theme of the 7th LAb Session, autonomy and learner agency, was designed to structure a discussion around the complexity of these terms and how they border, overlap or even exist separately from each other. We, the organisers, were interested in exploring how individuals and institutions viewed agency and autonomy from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Theoretically, conceptions of autonomy and agency have been

interpreted in a multitude of ways. For some, they are “incommensurable terms” (Benson & Cooker, 2013, p. 184), while at times, agency is seen as a precondition for autonomy (Gao, 2013). From a self-determination theory perspective, autonomy is understood as a psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and Reeve (in press) argues for a reconceptualisation of ‘learner autonomy’ as three distinct but interconnected concepts – agentic action, autonomy, and environmental autonomy support. Practically, autonomy has implications for the professional development of educators (Cheon et al., 2018), language advising (Mynard, 2020), and self-directed courses and modules (Watkins, 2015). In the sections below, I shall summarise some of the key takeaways from each of the invited speakers and several of the theoretical, research and practice-based presentations.

Featured Presentations

Our first invited speaker was Mayumi Kashiwa from Kanda University of International Studies, Japan. Situated in a definition of learner agency as ownership and sense of control over learning in which agentic learners take initiative to seize or create opportunities to learn. Mayumi shared a narrative case study which employed visual data collection methods to better understand how a student configured and perceived her learning environments beyond the classroom. She concluded that spatial perspectives of learning environments can provide insights into the processes behind learner agency development and that visual tools can be effective in raising learners' awareness of the affordances available to them.

Sharing the definition of learner agency as a feeling of ownership and sense of control over learning, our second invited speaker Xuesong (Andy) Gao from The University of New South Wales, Australia, outlined what learner agency means for those within the language education sector. In doing so, he also elaborated on how it differs from other self-concepts such as autonomy and self-regulation. Perhaps most relevant was the discussion on potential constrictions which need to be addressed when trying to develop learner agency within institutions, including self-access learning centres (SALCs). These constrictions included cultural and social expectations, teacher (or staff) development, learner factors and the conditions of learning.

Our final invited speaker was Johnmarshall Reeve from the Institute of Positive Psychology and Education at the Australian Catholic University, Australia. Johnmarshall outlined how both autonomous and agentic engagement are essential to learners' motivation and engagement before addressing the question of how SALC staff can encourage learners'

autonomy and agency when participation within a SALC is voluntary, optional and self-directed. In the final portion of his presentation, three examples of “proactive autonomy support” were introduced. It was during this section that the attendees became rather animated in the online chat and shared their own stories, ideas and suggestions for contextualised modifications to Johnmarshall’s examples.

Theoretical Conceptualisations

Starting off the theoretical presentations, Blair Matthews explored agency in relation to the contexts from which they emerge. He introduced the notion of distributive teacher agency in which educators need to identify objects (human, physical and intangible) within contexts before looking for how these objects function together. In a similar vein, Gregory Paul Glasgow used Realist Social Theory (Archer, 1995) to arrive at an understanding of language teacher agency inclusive of not only an individuals' capabilities but in relation to the structural and cultural realities of classroom, institution and national policies. Situating his talk in the contextual realities of his students’ lives, Jon Rowberry began his presentation by arguing that rather than autonomy, the concept of agency encapsulates the situational, action-based needs of low-proficiency students. Finally, drawing on Higgins (1997), Curtis Edlin used regulatory fit, the balance between task requirements, an individual's disposition and the strategy used, as a proxy for autonomy. Individuals who are able to identify situations and strategies that fit with their disposition, often through trial and error, are to employ reflexivity to understand what actions they truly endorse.

Research Summaries

While there were many wonderful presentations focused on recently completed research projects, this section will only look at a few with potential applications to SALCs. Christopher Alan Knoepfler shared his study in which he investigated the type and frequency of out-of-class resources used by Japanese learners of English. His findings revealed that an awareness of the education value of entertainment/informational media resources led to their strategic use for regulating motivation. English media is vast however, with a seemingly unlimited number of choices to be made. For SALCs this presents an opportunity to play a role in providing guidelines for evaluating media and creating physical and online spaces for peer-to-peer sharing to take place. SALC staff may wish to employ the backward design model used by Gamze A. Sayram in her collaborative independent learning project to consider ways that they too can place their learners at the core of the decision-making process

when it comes to sharing resources or reflecting on their use of materials. Additionally, Ward Peeters' breakdown of elements that can be used in online settings to scaffold learner autonomy in peer-to-peer interactions may bolster the effectiveness of any intervention being designed. These elements included collaborativeness, contingency, fading and the transfer of responsibility.

Practice-Based Presentations

Focusing on practitioners and what they can do to support their learners, Ellen Head demonstrated how positioning theory (Kayı-Aydar, 2019) can be applied to help educators and learning advisors see the difference between how they construct students' roles versus how students construct their own role. As a workshop activity, short scenarios were provided to encourage the attendees to make connections between their own discourses and practices which invite autonomy. Micòl Beseghi, in her presentation, began with an overview of Mindfulness before identifying several of the commonalities it shares with advising in language learning. Using advising sessions as a space for introducing mindfulness practices, mindful listening, mindful breathing and circle sharing activities were then offered as practical applications to support learner autonomy and agency.

Closing Comments

In writing this reflection, I realised that my involvement in this LAB session had left its mark on me in a way that can be best summarised as 'the devil is in the details.' Autonomy and learner agency share a conceptual and practical space but it wasn't until I started writing this review and reviewing the presentations that I realised how much of the nuance I had missed the first or second time round. As someone operating within an autonomy-supportive SALC it is easy to fall into complacency - to think I know what it means to be autonomous or agentic. The reminder that autonomy and agency are more nuanced, more ambivalent, more dynamic, than their occasionally educational buzzword status would have us assume was timely. Finally, I would like to thank everyone involved in the organisation of the event and especially Jo Mynard for giving me the opportunity to be part of the organisation process. The knowledge that future LAB Sessions will continue to explore what autonomy means to people in different contexts around the world fills me with excitement. The discussion is evolving and I encourage everyone to be involved.

Notes on the Contributor

Amelia Yarwood is a Learning Advisor at Kanda University of International Studies. She has been active in planning, implementing and researching interventions to support the development of learners' reflective capabilities, identity, motivation and autonomy. Her current goal is to complete her doctoral degree through Kansai University's Graduate School of Foreign Language Education and Research, Japan.

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