BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Learner autonomy and Web 2.0*

Randall Sadler, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Learner autonomy and Web 2.0

Cappellini, M., Lewis, T., & Mompean, A. R. (Eds.)

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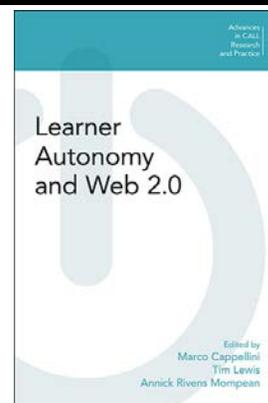ISBN: 978-1-78179-597-2

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The continuing development of Web 2.0—and, some might argue, the emergence of Web 3.0—has led to a myriad of opportunities for learners that often simply did not exist as little as a 10 years ago. The potential of Web 2.0 to enhance the language learning process is the focus of *Learner autonomy and Web 2.0*, edited by Cappellini, Lewis, and Mompean. They base their definition of *learner autonomy* on the work of Dam (2003), who defines it as the following:

> …a developing capacity on the part of learners to accept responsibility for their learning. Teachers who aim to promote a learner-directed learning environment encourage learners to reflect on their learning, understand the process of learning and the function of language, and adopt patterns of learning in which they themselves take initiatives and feel in control of their progress." (p. 135)

While there have been many studies examining the effect of Web 2.0 tools on the language learning process, this book makes a significant contribution in terms of the specific focus on learner autonomy, the variety of platforms researched, and the inclusion of a chapter with an underutilized format in such edited volumes (explained below). Especially considering its relatively modest price in these days when edited educational texts are all too often out of reach for most academics, this book should be a welcome addition to the library of those focused on technology and language learning.

The book is divided into nine chapters and is arranged into six general themes, including the following:

- A framework for thinking about language learning and teaching (Chapter 2)
- Learner autonomy: From constraints to affordances (Chapter 3)
- Learner autonomy and metacognition (Chapters 4 and 5)
- Learner autonomy in social media (Chapters 6 and 7)
- Learner autonomy: From object-regulation to self-regulation (Chapter 8)
- Learner autonomy and informal learning: Exchange value and use value (Chapter 9)

After an introductory chapter orienting the readers to the volume, Chapter 2 provides something not often seen in academic texts: an entire chapter consisting solely of the transcript of an interview. In this case, the transcript details a discussion hosted by Lewis with Little and Thorne as the interviewees. While this

is an unusual format, it allows the freedom for the interview to cross a range of times (from the late 1970s to today), settings (from the traditional classroom to work with Yup'ik communities in Alaska and online social networks), and theories (from those proposed by Vygotsky, 1978; to Swain, 1985; and Tomasello, 2003). The end result is a chapter that lays a firm foundation for those that follow, providing the reader with a deeper understanding of the nuances of learner autonomy. This is a chapter I will most certainly require my own students (future ESL and EFL teachers) to read in the future.

In Chapter 3, Suvorov and Cabello examine the role of adaptive learning systems (ALSs), which they define as "computer-based systems designed to adapt new content to students' individual needs" (p. 37). Their mixed-method study includes data from online surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, reflection journals, and Likert-scale questionnaires and examined 35 undergraduates studying Spanish over the course of a semester. They make use of two commercially produced ALSs in order to determine what affordances or constraints the use of ALSs in Spanish courses might create for the development of learner autonomy. In both cases, the ALSs offered a variety of vocabulary and grammar exercises, with the level of difficulty of subsequent questions determined by previous student performance. While their study found that ALS offered a number of affordances, including extended practice and review, adaptive learning, and the benefit of instant feedback, there were also some significant constraints. The instant scoring was seen as beneficial, however many of their participants also found the systems to be overly inflexible in that "answers [had to] be an exact match, down to punctuation and capitalizations" (p. 54), resulting in student frustration and a lessening of motivation. Their participants were also frustrated by the lack of specificity in feedback from the Orion system as they wanted to know not only "if you got it wrong, but…How you got it wrong" (p. 55).

Moraes Garcia, O'Connor, and Cappellini perform a qualitative investigation on the effect of a collective blog in Chapter 4. Their study was constructed as part of a teletandem project between eight students studying English in France and eight students learning French in Australia. Their teletandem focus included the need for "reciprocity, dual language use, and autonomy" (p. 68). Over the course of the study, students were required to meet with their assigned partner at least six times via Skype (with three of the meeting topics determined by the researchers and three determined by the partners) and to document these meetings on the collective blog. The Australian students were required to write in French, and the French students were given their choice of either English or French. The data, consisting of the blog posts, was then examined for "evidence of metacognitive operations related to learners' autonomization" (p. 75) in four areas: setting goals, planning learning activities, self-evaluation of learning and learning strategies, and the emotional dimension of tandem learning. They found that while some metacognitive components appeared with relative frequency in the blog (i.e., planning of learning activities and evaluation of learning), others were either totally absent (i.e., setting goals) or infrequent (i.e., choosing learning activities). Perhaps their most interesting finding relates to the way that students in the teletandem project made use of strategies to manage their anxiety throughout the process and how this dimension affected all the others aspects that the researchers examined. While this chapter addresses important issues, I would love to see a follow-up replication of this research that also includes that actual Skype discussions as part of the data.

In Chapter 5, Pellerin utilizes an ecological approach to examine the idea of learner autonomy in the Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) context with her focus on an understudied group—young learners. Her data for this chapter, which were taken from a larger ethnographic study that took place over three years in a variety of authentic contexts in French immersion settings in Canada, include digital artifacts produced by the students created via a number of different apps and transcripts of individual and focus-group interviews. The analysis of the data led to the development of seven themes (or clusters), including *agency*, *affordances*, *self-regulation*, *voice*, *identity*, *motivation*, and *autonomy*. The student experiences that resulted in the creation of these themes by the researcher were documented both via transcripts and the inclusion of screenshots of apps illustrating a number of student creations. For example, in Cluster 6 (i.e., social interactions, agency, and learning environments), Pellerin used two excerpts to show how two of the young students used Puppet Pals to make their own animated puppet

show (providing a screenshot of their creation). She also demonstrated the need for the pair to "negotiate their use of the target language in order to create a dialog" (p. 107). This blending of data was very effective in illustrating the themes discussed. Her key, and very nicely stated conclusion, is that

> learner autonomy needs to be understood as a key element of a larger ecological system rather than an entity on its own. The data offer evidence that the key concepts of agency, identity, affordances, and metacognition are intertwined and work in synergy within a larger system to allow the emergence of learner autonomy in such environments. (p. 111)

This complexity of the elements surrounding learner autonomy is something all language teachers must keep in mind when seeking autonomy for their own students.

Chapter 6, by Peeters and Ludwig, looks at learner autonomy as it connects to one of the most popular elements of Web 2.0: social networks. The authors report on the results of two associated studies carried out on Facebook over a 2-year period. The researchers created a private Facebook group on which the students (all of whom were enrolled in an academic writing course for beginning majors of English as a foreign language in Belgium) discussed their writing processes and challenges while writing three required essays for the course. The data included almost 6,000 posts by two groups of students (119 in the first year and 112 in the second). Their survey data showed generally positive responses from the participants on the use of Facebook; a finding further supported by the comments left by the students on the survey questions. However, from a practitioner perspective, what I most appreciate in this chapter is the creation of their own "model on peer collaboration through social networking" (p. 136), which considers how various elements outside of the social network participation (class instruction, learning materials, tutor support, etc.) all play an important role in the development of learner autonomy. This relatively simple figure is well worth considering for teachers contemplating the use of social networks in their own courses.

Zourou, Potolia, and Zourou continue the examination of the role of social networks in Chapter 7, but this time, with a network specifically designed for language learners that includes gaming, social networking, and peer teaching components: Busuu. Instead of using this platform to perform a research study for an existing group of students, the researchers wished to investigate current users of Busuu to determine their individual characteristics and the role of social networking and gaming via Busuu in the adoption of a social autonomy or individual autonomy stance. They selected 1,528 participants from existing members of this platform who were active and mid-level users, who were either English- or French-speakers, and who lived in one of five countries for each language. Their data included user profiles and results of a survey created by the researchers and sent out by the site administrators. While their survey completion rate was relatively low (3.1%), their findings were nonetheless interesting, as they gave their readers a look at a social network from a perspective rarely accomplished in language research: that of learners who are both autonomous and not connected to a classroom (informal). Their primary findings from their questionnaire indicated that there was very strong approval of the peer correction feature of the platform (a social autonomy feature), with over 72% considering it essential. But, some features (e.g., the *berry* reward system, an individual autonomy element) were more mixed in terms of perceived benefit. Additional research of this type should be encouraged—while it is challenging (especially in terms of getting survey responses) it highlights an important segment of the language learning environments available today.

Fuchs researches two critical elements regarding a very popular Web 2.0 platform: language massive open online courses (LMOOCs). Specifically, she investigates their use in terms of learner motivation to complete one and how they might experience learner autonomy in such a course. Her 15 participants (all enrolled in a TESL graduate program) were required to enroll in a beginning LMOOC of their choice, with Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, and Hindi selected. As mentioned by the author, these LMOOCs varied in terms of course content and features, but all were aimed at beginning-level individuals. In addition to providing demographic data, all students kept weekly logs of their progress and completed a needs analysis and a post-experience questionnaire. While it has been well-established that the completion

rate for many LMOOCs is low, this research provided the reader with some of the details about why users do (or do not) complete one. Of the 15 participating students, four completed their initially chosen LMOOC, nine completed them partially (or switched to another), and two did not finish at all. The reasons for switching or not completing were various, ranging from the design of the site to boredom, a lack of support, or a low level of interaction with the instructor. However, it is important to note that while some students criticized the elements such as the feedback feature of their LMOOC, others praised the feedback received from theirs. Given their widespread use in education, this study suggests the need for further, large-scale research on the topic.

In Chapter 9, Toffoli and Perrot look at the role of online informal learning of English (OILE) and learning resource centers (LRCs) with a group of 16 second-year computer science students at a university in France, all of whom were required to make use of the LRC as part of their required English sessions. This case study asked the participants 19 questions, with the first 14 providing various background information. The remaining five questions investigated how the students used English online outside of the LRC, when they started doing so, how engaging in such practice made them feel, whether the student had written about that for their file at the LRC, and whether they felt comfortable with autonomous work in the LRC. There were several findings in this study that I found somewhat surprising (and very pleasing). Two of the background questions in their survey asked the students if they engaged in online reading and listening activities, and all the students responded that they do so very often. In addition, half of the students reported engaging in virtual world interaction either quite often or very often, a finding especially of interest to someone who does research in this field. While their participants did not specifically mention the term *autonomy* or other associated vocabulary in their responses, it was also apparent that they were engaging in a number of activities covered by that term, ranging from reading English novels, to reading manga, to gaming in another language. Concerning the role of a LRC in such an autonomous environment, they also found that 13 of the 16 respondents believed "OILE and English learning in the LRC…to be not only highly compatible…but also complementary" (p. 216). They conclude by encouraging teachers to have their students examine their own OILE experiences as part of the autonomy building process.

As a high school student studying Spanish in Spokane Washington in the (very) early 1980s, there were three options for exposure to the language: taking Spanish classes, taking a trip to one of the very few Mexican restaurants in town, or talking with one of the rare exchange students in the school who might (if lucky) be a Spanish speaker. Those days of a true dearth of opportunities for learner autonomy for language learners are now ancient history for students of any age. *Learner autonomy and Web 2.0* provides a timely contribution to this area, particularly as it includes an examination of students (and non-students) in a variety of settings and from various ages, making use of a wide array of Web 2.0 technologies. I found this to be a very approachable volume to read, and (as noted earlier) I will be making use of several of these chapters in my own courses in the future. Language teachers and those involved in computer-assisted language learning research would be well-served to get a copy of this volume for their own use.

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About the Author

Dr. Randall Sadler is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he teaches courses on telecollaboration and language learning, virtual worlds and language learning, and L2 reading and writing pedagogy. He is also the Director of the Illinois Teaching English as a Second Language and English as a Second Language Programs. His main research area is on the role of technology in language learning, with a particular focus on how computer-meditated communication and virtual worlds may be used to enhance that process.

E-mail: rsadler@illinois.edu