

Chapter 2, Activity 1: The multiple purposes of a literature review

In Chapter two, the multiple purposes of a literature review are summarised. In this activity, look at each extract below and identify the purpose/s being fulfilled by the reference to literature in each.

Sample extract 1

2.2 Defining learner autonomy

There has been a growing interest in learner autonomy in language teaching and learning over the past 30 years (Benson 2006) and much has been written in this area with the aim of coming to a better understanding of both the theory and practice of learner autonomy. However, reading through the literature one begins to see that learner autonomy is difficult to define precisely (Little 2002; Finch 2002) and that there are a number of different interpretations of the term. This lack of a coherent theory (Oxford 2003) may diminish the importance of learner autonomy, especially from the perspective of the teacher, thus making it difficult to implement and operationalise in the classroom (Reinders 2010). Nevertheless, our common goal as teachers, practitioners and researchers is to think critically about each of these views of learner autonomy, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses based on our current teaching and learning environments.

The term learner autonomy was originally defined in the early 1980s by Henri Holec as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Little 2004; Benson 2006; Field 2007). Since then learner autonomy has been defined in many ways using such words as *capacity*, *willingness*, and *attitude*. The following are definitions of learner autonomy commonly found in much of the literature:

- '*... a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action*' (Little 1991:4, cited in Finch 2002: 21)
- '*...a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person*' (Dam et al. 1990: 102)
- '*... an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning*' (Dickinson 1995:167)

Benson and Voller (1997:2, cited in Dofs 2007: 1-2) provide five characteristics of learner autonomy:

1. ... situations in which learners study entirely on their own
2. ... a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning
3. ... an inborn capacity [to learn] which is suppressed by institutional education
4. ... the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning

5. ... the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

Defining learner autonomy is no simple task as there is little consensus on its meaning. However, there is general agreement in all the literature that autonomous learners are those who understand the purposes of their learning programme, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of their learning objectives, plan practice opportunities, implement appropriate learning strategies, and regularly review and evaluate their progress (Cotterall 1995, 2000; Dickinson 1993, 1995; Little 2002, 2006; Field 2007).

What these definitions do well is give us a more holistic view of the learner (Little 2002) where the learner is perceived as a decision maker and one who is connected to the process of learning. They address the political aspect of learner autonomy where learners have the individual freedom to take control and make choices about their learning (Reinders 2010) as well as the philosophical view of learner autonomy where choice and independence in learning are seen as essential in preparing learners for full citizenship in a rapidly changing society (Cotterall 1995; Mezirow 1997). However, these definitions may fall short in their appeal to the teacher as they fail to consider the practical, classroom element of learner autonomy and the role of the teacher.

Benson (2008: 15) argues that learner autonomy from the teachers' perspective is primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning arrangements within established curricula'. A theory of learner autonomy must be informed by the perspective of the teacher in the classroom (ibid: 30). La Ganza (2008) offers a more appealing definition of learner autonomy for the teacher. He states:

'Learner autonomy is an achievement, attained interrelationally between the learner and the teacher' (p.65)

He argues that the degree to which learners can become autonomous and take responsibility for their learning depends on their relationship with the teacher. Learner autonomy is an *interdependent* relationship where the subject of learning, in our case a foreign or second language, is placed between teacher and learner. It is in this space that the teacher helps the learner develop his or her ability to make choices in their learning. This for me is the true essence and meaning of autonomy. Just as learning is social, so is learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is an

awareness of self as a learner which is developed through dialogue (e.g. with the teacher), social interaction and cooperation with others.

The concept of choice is fundamental to learner autonomy (Cotterall 2000). Autonomous learners can make choices in all aspects of their learning, and this includes when to be dependent on the teacher or when to be free from teacher direction. Chanock (2004) calls this '*responsible dependence on teachers*' (p.4). When learners are unable to take control of their learning, they are being responsible by asking someone who can help them and, as a result, they are better able to function in the new context (ibid). Thus, learner autonomy is about knowing one's options and knowing how to interact with all the resources available for one's learning. The teacher is one resource, but more importantly, they help the learner become better aware of other learning options and opportunities which surround them.

It is not enough to define learner autonomy as the *ability, capacity* or *willingness* to take charge of one's learning, although one cannot deny that this is a goal to be achieved by the autonomous learner. Learner autonomy can differ in value and meaning from culture to culture due to differences in cultural beliefs (Oxford 2003). A definition of learner autonomy must respect the view of the teacher in a particular teaching and learning context. The teachers' perspective is the starting point which initiates the dialogue needed for finding a definition and pedagogy of learner autonomy appropriate to the teaching and learning context. Just as the teacher is involved in developing learner autonomy, and supporting a learner's existing autonomy, it is vital that they are also involved in examining its definition and exploring classroom approaches and practices suitable and relevant to their educational setting. As Palfreyman (2003: 185) points out:

'...an educational organization which attempts to promote learner autonomy without facilitating discussion about what this means to different participants may well run into practical difficulties, which are all the more baffling if those concerned appear to share a common goal.'

Explanation:

This extract includes a discussion of the concept of autonomy, making reference to a number of different definitions in the literature. By doing this, the context of the research is introduced by drawing the reader's attention to the ongoing debate about learner autonomy amongst researchers in the field.

The extract also provides evidence that the concept of autonomy is complex and can be interpreted in a range of different ways; it justifies the research focus on the investigation of teacher perspectives of autonomy by arguing that the teacher's input is essential for the definition and development of learner autonomy in any particular teaching and learning context.

Sample extract 2**2.7 Related research into the teachers' perspective of learner autonomy**

A great deal has been written about learner autonomy (e.g. definitions, justifications). However, there has been very little research carried out into teachers' perspectives and little is known about what learner autonomy means to language teachers in various contexts and educational settings around the world (Borg 2010). In this section we will briefly examine three studies which have begun to investigate teachers' voices in relation to learner autonomy and show how the current research extends this work.

Al-Shaqsi (2009) reports on English teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy at General Education schools in Oman. Learner autonomy as a goal is now represented in the new Basic Education curriculum in Oman and this may have influenced the 'surprisingly [high]' (Borg 2009: xiii) positive results from this study. Teachers defined learner autonomy in terms of learning independently, self-evaluation, taking responsibility and cooperating. Furthermore, they were optimistic that their learners displayed autonomous behaviours. However, these results need to be taken with caution for two reasons. First, there is no qualitative data (from interviews, for example) to help explain and/or clarify the questionnaire findings. The researcher of this study also acknowledges this weakness stating that some of the findings from the study were unclear and needed further exploration so as to clarify teachers' responses. Secondly, the current educational policy in Oman encourages autonomous learning and teachers may have responded in ways which reflect this policy.

Camilleri (1997) to my knowledge was the first study to investigate teachers' views of learner autonomy. The study was carried out with teachers in various European countries. The main findings were:

- A willingness of teachers to change and develop practice
- Strong support in incorporating learner autonomy in different areas of teaching (material selection, areas of classroom management, learning strategies, learning styles)
- A reluctance of teachers to involve learners in aims and methodological decisions
- Constraints from higher authorities made it hard to encourage learner autonomy or offer more learner choice (from Camilleri 1997: 28-30)

There were a high number of incomplete responses which raises the question of piloting procedures and validity of the findings. However, there are some important implications we can take from this study. First, resistance to learner autonomy initiatives could be the result of situations beyond teacher control (e.g. syllabus constraints, exam schedules). Secondly, the study revealed the need to 'educate' teachers in learner autonomy through pre-service and/or in-service professional development. Finally, Camilleri (1997) argued that teachers and teacher educators need to decide which areas of learner autonomy are feasible within the educational setting. They then need to organise professional development (with teacher input) around these topics before gradually working on classroom implementation. For these reasons, I have decided to investigate teacher perspectives of autonomy and then offer a professional development workshop on learner autonomy for teachers upon completion of the project.

In another study, Chan (2003) examined teacher's perspectives of learner autonomy in a large-scale study at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her findings show that teachers felt mainly responsible for the methodological decisions within the classroom. Nevertheless, respondents reported a clear awareness of autonomy as a goal of teaching and felt fairly positive about students' decision making abilities in aspects of the language learning process. Teachers did feel, however, restricted by curriculum constraints and consequently did not provide decision-making opportunities for learners in areas of autonomous learning (e.g. learning objectives, activities). This study is relevant to mine as I have developed my questionnaire from

the one designed by Chan as it is clearly based on the literature and theory of learner autonomy. I have also adopted a similar 'mixed method' methodology of gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. This study highlights the fact that learner autonomy cannot be encouraged without support from the teacher. In addition, it shows that thinking about our beliefs and teaching practices is important as it allows for reflection and change if needed. One weakness, however, in Chan's research is that she does not provide sampling procedures for her qualitative data (e.g. random, hand-picked or voluntary selection?). This is important information as it could have had some influence over the views expressed.

In summary, as teachers clearly play a central role in the promotion of learner autonomy, uncovering their beliefs in this area is an important gap to fill. This has been the main influence in my decision to explore teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy for this research project.

Explanation:

In this extract, which is the final section of the literature review chapter, three related empirical research studies are summarised and critiqued to show how the current research extends this work. The aims, key findings and implications of each study are given, and limitations and weaknesses are highlighted. The influence of the findings and implications of the two latter studies on the current research are also discussed (e.g. Chan's methodology has been used to inform the questionnaire design of the current study). An overall summary at the end of the section draws together the argument that the relative scarcity of research in the area of teacher beliefs on autonomy leaves a gap for the current research to fill.

If we compare Extracts one and two above, we can see how Extract one illustrates a critical discussion of the underpinning theoretical concept of autonomy whereas Extract two gives an example of a critical summary of related empirical research in the area of teacher perspectives on autonomy. This contrast between the two extracts shows the distinctive ways of using the literature, i.e. the multiple purposes for which the literature is integrated into your writing.

Extracts are adapted from: Barillaro, F. (2011) 'Teacher perspectives of learner autonomy in language learning'. MA dissertation, Sheffield Hallam University