



Review of “Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning in a Virtual Learning Environment”

Title	Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning in a Virtual Learning Environment
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Year of Publication	2013
ISBN	978-1-4411-5064-6 (hardcover)
No. of Pages	viii + 248 pp
Place of Publication	New York
Publisher	Bloomsbury Academic (Continuum)

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Equipped with ever advancing technology, language learners are faced today with a “brave new world” compared with traditional practice, in which learning takes place basically in a teacher-dominated classroom. In her monograph, Hamilton makes an ambitious attempt to establish theoretical underpinnings for the interaction between autonomy and language learning in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which has become a significant research topic in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) fairly recently. An educational consultant and researcher at Cambridge English Language Assessment, she is passionately involved in exploring the revolutionary potential of digital technology in educational settings, especially the possible ways in which learners will be affected in the age of machine-aided learning.

Divided into nine chapters, the book opens with a brief overview of the elemental issues involved in the complex relationship it sets out to deal with, that is, autonomy, foreign language learning and technology, which is most succinctly articulated through the title “Paradox and Promise.” After listing a number of favorable assumptions about autonomy and technology, especially the optimism towards the active role of modern technology in enabling independent learning and in enhancing opportunities to learn, the author shares her suspicions about the validity of such assuring assumptions and about the beguiling sentimentality in glorifying technology. It is rightly noted that the crux of the matter is the nature of the relationship between autonomy, language learning and technology. Borrowing theoretical insights from scholars like Holec and Little on learner autonomy, Hamilton highlights the notion of “interdependence” in situated learning environments with special reference to a computer-aided VLE.

In line with this basic theoretical outlook, Hamilton outlines the research project on which the book is based. In the focused case study conducted with a group of advanced English language learners in Mexico, she carefully records and examines the students’ behavior in and response to a Moodle-based course named English International (EI). Through the thorough analysis of the considerable amount of qualitative data collected, she is able to generate fresh insights into and explanations for the learner behaviors observed and recorded in the small-scale study.

Chapter Two provides readers with a quick overview of autonomy as a primary premise for an updated understanding of the nature of the relationship between learner autonomy and technology.

Following a critical review of the multiple interpretations of and heated debates over this elusive term in the literature, she proposes the notion of “ecological autonomy” to better accommodate a closer examination of autonomy at work in the specific language learning context. Ecological autonomy, as defined in the chapter, mostly concerns learner’s “cognitive capacity to respond to the fluidity of the socially interactive web of unpredictability” (p. 47). The noteworthy terms, “fluidity” and “unpredictability,” justifiably characterizes a VLE because: 1) the environment is essentially fluid, with learners constantly confronted with choices and challenges which do not present in a traditional predetermined manner; and 2) it is highly unpredictable in that learning may take place on various occasions, even under the least expected circumstances at times, with technology and teachers playing mediating roles in the modern language class. Such a novel view of autonomy is assumed to lend itself better to the linking of the internal and external dimensions of the central concept of interdependence. It is hence compatible with the theoretical framework for autonomy in VLE.

In Chapter Three, “Technology: Virtual Promise or Virtual Reality – the Pedagogical Challenge,” Dr. Hamilton presents various standpoints on technology and its potential influence on language learners. Based on the summarized defining features of a VLE, she details both the cheerful “promise” and the harsh “reality” technology entails in the modern SLA context. She acknowledges the innate autonomy of learners and the motivating affordances of a VLE in engaging learners in language learning activities. Accordingly the book deals with such issues as: 1) the nature of the relationship between autonomy and technology with insights from learners’ perceptions and use; 2) the influence of a newly introduced technology in the environment on learner behavior; 3) the holistic understanding of the interaction between participants and their reactions towards the VLE; and 4) learners’ choices made in response to the VLE and their perceptions of the VLE learning experience with regard to learner autonomy and free use of the L2 (p. 69). The truthful picture breaks away from uncritical sentiments about the aiding role of technology and offers a comprehensive discussion of the issue of learner autonomy as realized in a VLE.

With the revealing title “Shadow Dancing: Autonomy in Action,” Chapter Four offers a thorough depiction of the actualized learner autonomy for a better understanding of the nature of the interaction between autonomy and language learning. The difficulty in approaching the slippery term of autonomy, as captured by the metaphor, is systematically demonstrated in a conceptual framework from a unique ecological perspective inspired by van Lier (2004). This framework deals not only with various aspects involved in exercising autonomy in a VLE, for example, type of autonomy (proactive and reactive autonomy in the VLE classroom) and context (blended learning), but also offers definitions, example behaviors and descriptors which course designers may work with and check against. A detailed description of the EI VLE course, from its course materials (with sample lessons presented in appendices) to post-lesson activities including project work and assignments, is provided to demonstrate the feasibility and applicability of the tentative framework, which is also expected to offer inspirations to language teachers who may be interested in experimenting with similar computer-mediated courses.

Chapter Five reports learners’ feedback on the EI course and their reflections on English learning in a VLE. Such evaluation from the learners’ perspective is of immediate relevance to validating the theoretical framework and successful learning program design and implementation, as it is believed to serve as the starting point for understanding the complicated relationship. There is sound evidence that the idea of a VLE can create among students positive perceptions of and attitudes towards language learning. Apart from freeing them of the worry and uncertainty about the “unconventional” way of learning via online interaction, the EI course has indeed benefited students in unexpected ways as their personal reflections about the learning experience and the record of their learning activities suggest. Nevertheless, students are confronted with such radical challenges as making the fundamental role shift from language *learners* to language *users*, adapting to the guided or independent learning methods, and exploring individual ways of engaging in the virtual class. By creating a lively combination of different learning resources and by helping stu-

dents explore the possibility of interaction and cooperation, EI has been successful in making more conscious and better learners out of the students.

The following two chapters are devoted to discussions of two issues which emerged in a careful examination of the students' learning experience. Chapter Six "Perceptions and Reality 1: Students' Response to Using a VLE in Computer Room Lessons" deals with the students' perspectives on the VLE and the potential of the newly discovered platform in supporting the learner-user transformation, and Chapter Seven "Perceptions and Reality 2: Beyond the Classroom – Students' Free Time Use of the VLE" focuses on the potential benefits from access to technology-mediated affordances for students' learning experience beyond the classroom. With reference to classroom activities, patterns of students' use of the target language are examined and the facilitating role of EI in motivating more engaging, target language communication is well shown. In addition to in-class learning, the students' assignments and forum access are also evaluated to explore further into recurring themes, preferred topics and students' feedback on the designated learning activities. The author also gives a description of the computer room where the EI lessons are taught, addressing specifically the various ways through which learning opportunities are provided. Moreover, the value of interactivity within the VLE is emphasized to dispel the false impression that EI class is little more than teaching with an electronic textbook. Similarly, in the discussion on learners' free-time access to VLE, the author proposes the use of virtual discussion forums as platforms for students' out-of-class discussion activities in their free time, and offers a detailed analysis of their language production in the form of posted threads.

Chapter Eight summarizes the ecological perspective of autonomy, foreign language learning and technology, presenting a framework for autonomous learning in a VLE. Central to the conceptual framework are the guided view which acknowledges the important role of the design of the VLE classroom and free-time VLE access, the autonomous view which posits autonomy as a response to the reconfigured learning environment, and the eclectic view which highlights the development of autonomous behavior achieved through VLE blended lessons and free-time VLE access.

The closing chapter entitled "Looking Back, Thinking Forwards" adds concluding remarks to the book's discussion on technology and learner autonomy, and offers significant theoretical and pedagogical insights to researchers and educators for experimentation with novel ideas of L2 teaching and learning. It thus generates a wide range of exciting research topics which are deserving of closer attention in the rapidly digitalizing world.

With growing interest in simulated learning, SLA researchers are starting to pay serious attention to various aspects of Internet-mediated classes, learners' interactions and negotiations in virtual learning activities, and so forth. The ultimate question that may still need further exploration is: How and in what ways will technology affect learning. Is technology-powered language learning necessarily more effective than traditional ways of learning? We may attempt to answer this question by intuitively linking the more advanced with the better and more effective, but the relationship between learning and technology is much more complex than simplistic optimism leads us to believe. With the advent of a machine-mediated learning age, it is possible now to visualize how learning will look like in the near future when autonomy ceases to be just a buzz word and becomes instead an integral part of an individual's learning experience. Thus, this book can be seen as a prelude to burgeoning research in VLE-mediated language learning and a pioneering work to address the thorny issue of understanding the relationship between autonomous learning and technology. It is highly recommendable to researchers who are gaining an interest in this largely underexplored field of study, as well as to teachers who are trying to adapt to new language classrooms where the benefits of technology are exploited.

Reference

van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.