Learner Autonomy
Theoretical and practical information for language teachers

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Abstract

This essay deals with the concept of learner autonomy and how it may be implemented in the classroom. Main ideas and concepts are explained and the findings of leading scholars in this field are presented. There is special focus on practical information that teachers can make use of when taking their first steps towards learner autonomy in regards, for example, to group work, logbook use, reflection and assessment. In addition, ideas are presented on how activities can be adapted to learner autonomy and how a lesson plan can be organized with the principles of learner autonomy in mind.

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Introduction

Learner autonomy in language learning is nothing new, but in the last twenty years it has had significant influence on English learning, be it English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The educational system today in Iceland puts a lot of emphasis on differentiation and catering to individual learners with different abilities and individual interests. The National Curriculum makes several references to giving learners choice and creativity in both input and output. Learner autonomy caters to all of this as it moves the focus from teaching to learning. It allows learners to work on different tasks, not all doing the same thing at the same time. It accentuates self-assessment with emphasis on logbooks and written journals. This kind of self-assessment has in some schools already been introduced with the use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). When implementing learner autonomy in the classroom teachers need to take a lot into consideration, and we will try to shed light on the main factors in the following pages.

As teacher students, we are particularly interested in implementing learner autonomy in our future classrooms, but how exactly does one do that? In theory, it sounds simple and effective, but for new teachers it can be daunting to shift the focus from the teacher to the learner and thus give the learners more power. In this essay we will try to clarify the meaning of learner autonomy in relation to the ESL/EFL classroom, and discuss its value for English teachers in Icelandic schools. Chapter 1 will look at the roles of teachers and learners in the autonomous classroom, and also the main characteristics of the autonomous classroom. In addition, contrast between policy and reality in European and Japanese schools will be briefly discussed.

Chapter 2 will focus on methods of implementing learner autonomy, such as logbooks, autonomous activities and reflection. Chapter 3 deals with the organization of classroom work. We provide examples of activities for the autonomous classroom and give special attention to group work which is a prominent feature in the autonomous classroom. Chapter 4 is dedicated to assessment methods which are well suited for learner autonomy such as logbooks, self- and peer- assessment. Chapter 5 sheds light on how learner autonomy complements differentiation, an educational

approach that is very common in Icelandic elementary schools. Finally, chapter 6 recounts three success stories from teachers that have implemented learner autonomy in their classrooms. In addition it points out problems a teacher might encounter when implementing learner autonomy.

1. Moving the spotlight from teaching to learning

"The concept of learner autonomy … emphasizes the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher. It focuses on the process rather than the product and encourages learners to develop their own purposes for learning and to see learning as a lifelong process" (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001).

One of the key principles of learner autonomy is moving the focus from teaching to learning; take the teacher out of his spotlight and point it at the learners. This may seem daunting to new teachers or indeed experienced teachers who have been the centre of attention and in control of their classroom. But as David Little wrote:

> *"I believe that all truly effective learning entails the growth of autonomy in the learner as regards both the process and the content of learning; but I also believe that for most learners the growth of autonomy requires the stimulus, insight and guidance of a good teacher" (Little, 2000).*

Moving the focus from teaching to learning clearly doesn't mean that the teacher becomes obsolete or redundant. It means a change of pace from where lessons are organized around textbook material and the ground a teacher needs to cover. Lessons are now organized in collaboration with learners in regards to both material and methods.

Daunting though it may seem, this radical change is not impossible and has been implemented all over the world. A teacher student in an action research study initiated at the University of Iceland used the theory and methods behind learner autonomy in her teaching practice in a classroom at the lower secondary level of elementary school. She wanted to increase learner autonomy by creating a collaborative learning situation. The learners were given opportunities to choose and take responsibility for their own learning. They chose topics, working approaches and formed their own groups. The learners organized themselves, decided upon homework and did final presentations. The teacher student's role was that of a facilitator. Assessment was partly peer and self-assessment (Lefever, 2005).

At the beginning, learners' reactions ranged from enthusiasm to displeasure, but according to the teacher student, the results of the experience were positive for most of the learners. The learners came to the conclusion that even though they were responsible for their own learning, the teacher also shared a part of the responsibility. They found that they paid more attention to presentations because they were given the responsibility of giving feedback to their peers (Lefever, 2005). By moving the focus from teacher to learners the learners got motivated and involved in their own learning and what was going on in the classroom.

To fully understand the concept of autonomy and its focus on learning rather than teaching, we must take a closer look at what is entailed in both the learner's and teacher's roles. We will then shed light on what characterizes the autonomous classroom.

1.1 The learner's role

"The students have responsibility for their learning but *through scaffolding, the teacher takes more responsibility than in a traditional class" (Lacey, 2007, p. 8).*

The learner's role in an autonomous environment is not that of a passive receiver of information. Learners are the makers of their own fortune and valued members of a learning community that is their class. Autonomous learners have the ability and willingness to learn on their own. Learners become successful if they take responsibility for their own learning. It is up to learners if they want to learn (Lowes & Target, 1999)!

Leni Dam characterized learner autonomy by "a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes". Autonomous learners are those who understand why they are learning specific topics, accept responsibility for their learning, take the initiative in planning and executing learning activities and are willing to assess their own learning (Little, 2002). Learners' active participation in and responsibility for their own learning process are essential in the field of foreign language learning (Dam, 1995). The learner needs to be willing to "act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person" (Dam, 1995).

Learner autonomy includes the learner's reflective involvement in all aspects of the learning processes. Learners become autonomous by assuming responsibility for their own learning. This includes being involved in all aspects of the learning process: planning, implementation (monitoring) and assessment. Their autonomy grows as they become conscious of the process of learning (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003).

A factor that is vital to learner autonomy is self-assessment. Learners need to build up their own personal criteria for the quality of their work and develop independence from the teacher as the sole judge of their weaknesses and strengths. This helps the learners make informed decisions about their next steps in the learning process and removes the dependence on the teacher. They do not have to wait for him to tell them what to do next and how well they are doing. Even though the teacher remains the more knowledgeable and experienced person in the classroom, the goal is for learners to increase their knowledge and level of competence.

1.2 The teachers role

> *"Let me first of all mention the fact that learners do not necessarily learn what we believe ourselves to be teaching… What we* can *do is give our learners an awareness of how they think and how they learn – an awareness which hopefully will help them come to an understanding of themselves and thus increase their self-esteem" (Dam, 2000, p. 18).*

The traditional view is that teachers should be in control of the classroom and direct learning. To some, learner autonomy may sound more like bringing chaos in the classroom. Nevertheless teachers can successfully make the choice of relinquishing control and sharing it with the learners (Lacey, 2007).

Dominant traditions in psychology and education see learning as internal to the individual, and it is clear that any substantial effort to learn within a traditional educational environment requires an exceptional individual effort. Thus, it is not surprising that teachers tend to think of their classes as collections of individual learners who may sometimes come together in small groups for purposes of practice. Neither is it surprising that they tend to think that individual learning is in some way

more economical and effective than group work. Social-interactive principles of learning, on the other hand, see the group as the primary focus of learning activity and individual learning as a matter of consolidating on past and preparing for future group learning (Little, 2000).

Fostering autonomy in the classroom is done by providing learners with "opportunities to make significant choices and decisions about their learning" in an informed way (Nunan, 2003, p. 290). That means the learners have a say in what and how they learn, and the teacher encourages this by giving the learners opportunities and tools to make informed decisions regarding their learning. This applies both to choosing appropriate material and learning strategies. Giving choices to the learners is a change that needs to be made gradually by taking into consideration their age and how much responsibility they are used to (Lowes & Target, 1999).

The teachers' role in an autonomous language classroom is to help learners learn by exposing them to the language and providing opportunities for them to practice the new language in class as well as at home (Lowes & Target, 1999). A teacher aiming to foster learner autonomy in his classroom also has to be aware of the importance of differentiation. Differentiating instruction is the idea of accommodating different ways learners learn; to design the lessons according to learners' needs and differences in the classroom. In a differentiated classroom it should be taken into consideration that learners have different abilities, skills and backgrounds. All of this affects the way they learn (Tomlinson, 2003).

A big part of implementing autonomy in the classroom is to teach diverse learning strategies, and assist the learners in finding the methods that best suit them. The learners have to be given the tools they need to become more self sufficient and independent. The Ministry of Education is exceedingly clear in its regard to learner autonomy and independence. It stipulates that practice in learning strategies is a solid part of language learning and should be related to the material being dealt with at any time (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007).

In an autonomous classroom, teachers do not play the role of imparters of information or sources of facts. Their role is more that of a facilitator. The teacher's position is to

manage the activities in the classroom and help learners plan their learning both for long and short term. The teacher has to be able to establish a close collaboration with the learners and make sure that all learners know what is expected of them at all times (Lowes & Target, 1999).

Teachers have the role of counselors. They need to inform learners and make them capable of choosing the best learning strategies. Learners have to be able to make informed choices. This means knowing the rationale behind the strategies and having time to experiment to find which suits best for each occasion. Teachers must, however, be careful not to guide the learners implicitly to the strategies they themselves prefer (Nunan, 2003).

A learner autonomous classroom is a place where learners and teachers have constructive interaction with each other and learn from each other. The teacher is responsible for helping learners become aware of alternative strategies and learning styles (Camilleri, 1999).

The teacher gives praise and feedback but this is also supplied by the other learners when group work and product is jointly assessed after projects are finished. Learners then get more personal feedback and guidance from the teacher through the logbooks which serve as a medium of communication as well as a tool of organization and reflection.

A teacher that intends to foster his learners' autonomy should not only introduce various learning strategies but also give his learners ample opportunity to try them out in different circumstances. It is necessary to build up an atmosphere in the classroom that invites such experiments and lets learners feel comfortable sharing their findings with their teacher and their classmates. Interaction in the classroom directly influences the learners' learning processes.

1.3 The autonomous classroom

"The students achieve ownership of their learning. The teacher no longer knows all the answers, meaning that communication in the FL classroom becomes authentic and the language becomes the means, as well as the goal" (Lacey, 2007, p. 5).

Leni Dam defines a learning centered environment as an environment where the learners are able to be consciously involved in their own learning. They are made aware of the various elements involved in the learning process by being expected to be actively engaged in their own. Some of the prerequisites for establishing such an environment are:

- A willingness on the part of the teacher to let go, and on the part of the learners to take hold;
- An understanding of what to do and why and how it should be done, this applies to teachers as well as learners;
- An experience-based insight into the learning process for both teachers and learners;
- An atmosphere of security, trust and respect (Dam, 2000).

One of the things that characterize the autonomous classroom is a strong emphasis on pair and group work as means to develop learner autonomy. The fact is that learners become less dependent on the teacher by learning to collaborate with their peers. Group activities play a large part in this because learners acquire a lot of learning strategies when collaborating with, and receiving support from their peers and not just the teacher (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001).

In learner autonomous classrooms teachers and learners become a learning community and the target language is one of the principal tools with which the collaborative process is shaped. (Little & Dam, 1998). The target language is used not just in communication, but also as a channel for learning, and a tool for reflection (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003). The teaching is not steered by the textbook, but the needs and experiences of the learners. Leni Dam suggests that language is learned

partly "from the inside out", as learners express their own meaning for learning purposes (Little & Dam, 1998).

To manage learners' learning process the teacher negotiates with them the course content and methodology. At the same time, the learners are informed about the learning process and discuss it. The learner forms his own conclusions about learning and is respected for his individual points of view (Camilleri, 1999). This process starts at the beginning of each school year and continues throughout. It is a continuous cycle of learning; each step leads to the next. Learners negotiate a project, and decide upon both material and process. The outcome is discussed and reflected upon; the next step is a consequence of the one taken before. One project leads to the next, and each time the learners come away aware of what they have learned, how they have learned and why.

The learners form groups based on their interests or other criteria chosen by them. The differences between able and low ability learners are less obvious because the learners work on self-assigned tasks as a part of a class and not a divided one (Lacey, 2007). This type of collaborative group work calls for different communication skills. The use of the target language and more learner-learner interaction and communication due to group work and general discussion, opens up a whole new world of speaking exercises and peer scaffolding. Learners also learn to work with different people and gain communicative skills.

2. Implementing learner autonomy

It is the teacher's responsibility to provide his learners with the opportunity to become autonomous, but it must be made clear that this does not happen in a day. A teacher has to introduce autonomy gradually and with purpose. This must be done in association with school administrators, learners and parents. Everyone must be aware of the changes being made and their purpose.

In creating a learner-centered classroom, the starting point is to shift the focus from the teacher and the textbook to the learners. One way of shifting focus away from the teacher is to arrange the learners to sit in groups, pairs or a horseshoe, if it is necessary to face the teacher and the blackboard. Rearranging the physical position in the classroom would make passing over of responsibility to the learners easier (Dam, 1995). One option in organizing the classroom is to organize the tables so that learners are seated in groups of four to six. Then each of them is facing three to five peers, and all of them face the teacher. This setting has a number of advantages:

- It makes quick discussions and exchange of views within a group possible.
- It invites learner cooperation and peer tutoring.
- It supports individual learner participation as it is less threatening to communicate in a small group than in a large group (Dam, 2000).

It is essential for young learners to have the impression that the teacher is interested in them from the very beginning. It is also crucial for the teacher to get knowledge about the learners and their English proficiency. Leni Dam talks about giving the learners their first "homework", which was to bring some "English" from home into the classroom to show them that English is not just a school subject, but it exists outside the classroom. The homework needs to be discussed and the efforts of learners who make a contribution to the lesson need to be appreciated (Dam, 1995).

Leni Dam puts a lot of emphasis in learner awareness in her aims for beginners of English language learning:

- "Awareness of WHY, WHAT and HOW to learn English;

- Awareness of possible activities supporting what, and how to learn;
- Awareness of the learners' role as well as the role of others in the learning process;
- Readiness to cooperate,
- Willingness to make choices and accept responsibilities for them." (Dam, 1995, p. 9).

Many teachers feel that the learners should have a right to control their learning and to have a say in decision-making, but it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that they actually learn and make progress in their language proficiency (Lacey, 2007). In order to become learner autonomous, learners need to learn how to set their own goals and choose which learning strategies work best for them.

Not a lot of learning takes place without motivation and active participation of the learners. Their interests have to be utilized and the subject has to be appropriate for their age and abilities. At the same time, it is essential that learners learn to take responsibility for their own learning. This implies that the teacher has to allow for freedom of choice and gradually allow the learners to spread their wings. The lesson activities have to allow learners to be creative from time to time.

2.1 Learners' logbooks

"Autonomy means me giving control to students but *logbooks give me more control/insight than I have ever had before" (Lacey, 2007, p. 7).*

Logbooks serve as a medium of communication between teachers and learners as well as a tool of organization and reflection. A learners' logbook is also a tool for awareness-raising and natural, authentic language use as it is written in the target language. Logbooks have a key role in the relationships that develop between teacher and learners. They are essential in the learning process for the teacher to monitor learners learning and provide scaffolding.

Knowing how to find the best learning strategies for a particular task is not something learners automatically know how to do. They need a lot of practice. A substantial part

of learner autonomy is reflection. Learners write in their logbooks about what they do, how they do it and why they choose a specific method. They also write about the results they get from this method. By doing this periodically, they begin to think about learning in general instead of always focusing on only one project at a time and rely on the teacher for guidance, expect the teacher to instruct them on how it is best to perform the task.

Frank Lacey, an experienced teacher in the use of traditional teaching methods, decided to implement learner autonomy in his classroom. At the beginning, Lacey was skeptical about some of the methods used in an autonomous classroom, for example, the logbooks. His learners however accepted logbooks as a step in taking responsibility for their own learning and for keeping updated on what, how and why they learned certain things. The information included in the learners' logbooks was not just documentation of their activities but also communication of their own process of learning and thoughts. English shed the role of a subject taught in school and became part of their real lives (Lacey, 2007).

Logbooks can be an indispensable tool for teachers to follow the progress of individual learners. Learners use logbooks to record the activities during the lessons, new words or expressions; register the homework decided by themselves or by the teacher and things that they enjoy or not (Dam, 1995). The logbook is useful for group and pair work, when organizing and distributing tasks. It provides an overview of daily or weekly reflections and assessments. The teacher should, in association with the learners, set up a list of guidelines or principles to be followed when writing in the logbooks. These guidelines should be checked and discussed on a regular basis (Dam, 2000).

One of the issues in implementing learner autonomy is that learners have a propensity to set highly ambitious goals in the beginning of their learning. It is the teacher's responsibility to have a talk with each learner and respond to learners' logbooks with appropriate feedback. The feedback should be realistic and positive to encourage learners forward, and redirect them if necessary (Yang, 1998).

2.2 Teacher's logbook

The main purpose of teacher's logbook is to keep track on the activities learners are involved in and their progress. In addition it is the place where teachers keep record of the assessment of each learner and observations of the learners' participation in classroom activities. The teacher could use the logbook to inform parents about the situation of their child at any point in the school semester.

Leni Dam (1995) explains the use of the logbook in her classes. The logbook is beneficial "to document and assess the ongoing teaching/learning process." In her logbook, the teacher embodies WHAT to do, lesson plans, and WHY those activities need to be done at that point; reflections on the course of the lessons including remarks, comments or things to remember for the following lesson.

The logbook is also a tool for keeping track of the individual learner's work – for the learner, the teacher and can also be of good use for parent – teacher meetings. Teachers should carry their logbooks with them and use explicitly in class to give a good example. There they keep track of their lessons, as well as the learning process of the learners. Teachers can also make notes of problems, successes or needs that emerge in discussions with learners. This way the learners see that using a logbook is a natural part of the learning process for the teacher as well as the learner (Dam, 2000).

2.3 Posters

Posters are highly effective in developing learner autonomy in the classroom. The teachers write, in an authentic target language, the decisions they make with the learners regarding planning the projects, group work, or assessment, for example. Posters are hanged all over the classroom as a support for learners to organize their work or to revise grammatical rules.

The teacher writes down decisions and assessments which are constructed by the whole class, groups or individuals (Dam, 1995). The learners' views, ideas and assessments are not wiped out at the end of the lesson. They are kept on the wall for

future use. In this way posters also provide learners with a lot of visible, authentic language (Dam, 2000).

There are different types of posters:

1. Lesson plan;
2. Working plan of different groups;
3. Ideas for activities or homework;
4. Demands and contracts for group work;
5. List of "helpers";
6. New words and expressions as a support for learners in communication in class or solving a certain task;
7. Grammatical rules (Dam, 1995, p. 41).

Leni Dam's video (1998) gives an example of how theory can become practice. She shows the evolution of a class of learners from a school in Denmark. The learners and the teacher need to decide what to do. The teacher comes up with a topic or a theme and together they form a group brainstorming about the chosen topic. The results are put up on a poster. The blackboard is used to display posters which show the members of each group, group's subject, and how its members are going to gather information. The group objective is to present their findings using posters.

2.4 Classroom routine

A clear lesson plan poster can facilitate the establishment of a learning-centered environment. It supports the teacher in letting go and the learners in taking hold in different ways. Teachers and learners' responsibility, as well the activities they are expected to take part in are clearly stated. In a joint session, the learners can share their experiences, and the knowledge they have gained with the others. This poster makes it clear when the teacher is in charge or a participant. It gives the classroom procedures certain stability, and provides the participants with a feeling of security (Dam, 2000). Below is an example of a classroom routine poster from Leni Dam which is aimed at a lesson of 2x45 minutes twice a week. This plan can be

adapted as a week plan rather than a lesson plan as it is usual in Icelandic elementary schools to have only 1x40 minutes four times a week.

Table 1: A classroom routine poster (Dam, 2000).

0	Opening of lesson
1	Teacher-initiated and directed activities promoting awareness-raising as regards

- Learning, the learning environment, and the roles and responsibilities expected from its participants
- Useful language learning activities in terms of
    - Interpreting
    - Expressing
- Learners' and teacher's assessment of teacher-initiated and directed activities

2   Learner-initiated and directed activities:

- Sharing homework
- "2 minutes' talk"
- "Free" learner-chosen activities in groups, pairs or individually within the given conditions
- Planning homework – and perhaps next step
- Learners' assessment of work carried out individually, in pairs, or in groups.

3   "Together" – a plenary session for the whole class including the teacher:

- Presentation and assessment of results or products from group work, pair work or individual work
- Joint events such as songs, lyrics, story-telling, quizzes, etc.
- Joint assessment of the lesson

Teacher-initiated and teacher-directed activities enable the teacher to make external demands and expectations clear to learners at successive stages in the learning process. These might be curricular guidelines, either from the National Curriculum or the school curriculum, or otherwise demands and expectations imposed by the teacher (Dam, 2000).

2.4.1 **"Two minutes talk"**

During this activity learners communicate in the target language in pairs for two minutes about any topic they choose. At the intermediate level "two minutes talk" and sharing homework is sometimes combined when a group has been working on the same project or reading the same text or book. This can be excellent preparation for

an exam. The "two minutes talk" can then be replaced by discussion points prepared by the learners for the text in question (Dam, 2000).

2.4.2 **Free activities**

"Free" activities are not entirely free. They are chosen from the list of "Ideas of what to do" poster. Whether the activity is done individually, in pairs or groups, a poster is made summarizing "Who", "What", "Why" and "How". The posters are then displayed on the wall for the rest of the class to see, along with a poster giving an overview of what each learner is doing (Dam, 2000).

2.4.3 **Homework**

Homework is a key factor in an autonomous classroom because typically the learners decide it. Within a group, the members decide and share the work on the project or activity that needs to be done for the following language class. The teacher can interfere in deciding the work that needs to be done at home if a member of the group did not attend the class, or when she plans extensive reading for the learners.

According to the National Curriculum, it is most important for successful language learning that learners undertake homework. The purpose of homework is to restore and build upon what was dealt with in a lesson, preparation for lessons or independent work. It is imperative that learners get to choose material now and again to work with at home. It is also ideal to encourage learners to use the target language outside of the classroom (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007).

Learners working in groups or pairs present to each other what they have done at home. Ideas for what to do when sharing homework expand all the time and are recorded on a poster. Unless a learner is absent and a partner for sharing homework is needed, the teacher does not take part in this activity (Dam, 2000).

At the end of learner-directed activities, the learners plan and delegate homework, either individually or in groups. Many groups will allocate tasks to be done at home in connection with their chosen activity. From time to time, the teacher will dictate homework that must be done, for example, reading. Dam states that in her experience

learners will often read far more than a teacher would think of demanding. She suspects this is a result of the fact that they have chosen books or texts that interest them and are at a level that suits them (Dam, 2000).

2.4.4 **Reflection**

It is necessary at the end of both teacher- and learner-initiated activities to allot time for reflection on the learning process. It is essential that through reflection learners make an attempt at self-assessment. The procedure can vary between learners according to their skill level. Weaker learners may prefer to give themselves a numeric grade on the scale of 1 to 10. More proficient learners might write a comprehensive letter to the teacher. The crucial element is that the reflection process forces all the learners to reflect systematically on what happened during the activities undertaken. This reflection provides a solid and personally meaningful basis for future self or shared assessment with other learners and/or the teacher (Dam, 2000).

3. Organizing classroom work

Classroom work in the autonomous classroom is not solely dictated by the teacher. The teacher has to keep everything together and oversee that a plan is being followed but the main difference from the traditional classroom is that this lesson plan is set up in collaboration with the learners.

3.1 Activities in an autonomous classroom

Hanne Thomsen is an experienced teacher who worked for years with mixed-ability learners in autonomous language classrooms in Denmark. In association with her students she set forth criteria for a good activity. A good activity for an autonomous classroom should be relevant, you should learn from it, and it should not be too easy or too difficult. To this Thomsen adds that it needs to cater to individual learners' interests and needs and be appropriate for cooperation. It should be open ended and entail differentiated processes as well as products. Her learners had many favorite activities such as writing reflections in the logbook, making authentic material for future use in the classroom, to do extensive reading and other individual work, pair and group speaking exercises and project work (Thomsen, 2000).

Activities in the learner autonomous classroom can be varied and usually there is something that caters to the interest of every learner. The fairy tale project that follows below is an example on how one cartoon can lead to different projects, be they individual, pair and group work.

3.1.1 Fairy tale project

This is an example of autonomous learning through project work. The fairy tale project was organized by Seeman and Tavares and worked on with 5th grade learners in 1998. The learners were in their second year of learning English.

1. Learners wrote down their individual goals for the project. Some wanted to expand their vocabulary; others wanted to improve their pronunciation, etc. This way each learner had a genuine reason for wanting to participate.

2. The teacher provided an input on the project by showing a video of cartoon stories in English based on Hans Christian Andersen's well known fairy tales. The learners were already familiar with the fairy tales and could understand the stories without too much difficulty. They could therefore concentrate on the linguistic input.
3. The class discussed the video and then split up into small groups of two to four learners to determine how they wanted to work on the fairy tale they had chosen. One group made word cards; another wrote in their logbooks about the fairy tales, the third group wrote their own fairy tale, etc.
4. When a group had finished their work, they shared what they had done and learnt with the rest of the class. They presented their work, assessed it and then asked the class for their assessment. By sharing their learning products this way, learners can find out what other groups in the class are doing and learn from one another. Very often different groups will emerge that want to try out what another group was working on.

This brief description shows how a wide range of activities can be generated by a single topic. It also demonstrates how important it is that the learners chose the topic and the associated activities themselves, through negotiation with the teacher and their fellow learners. The learners' involvement in their chosen activities is shaped by personal learning goals they individually set for themselves (Seeman & Tavares, 2000). All material produced by the learners during the lessons, working in groups or individually, is used by the entire class. Word cards, dominoes, picture lotto or small books provide an insight on the activities performed in the class (Dam, 1995).

3.2 Group work

"The class unity is lost in the many small groups but *weak students are, just like strong students, working on their self-assigned tasks, and thus are no longer segregated in the class, but are a part of the class" (Lacey, 2007, p. 7).*

Group work is an important part of the learner autonomous classroom. By shifting the focus from teaching to learning and diminishing the learners' dependence on the teacher the groundwork is laid for peer assistance. The relationship between learner

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autonomy and dependence means that at any particular time learners will be able to perform some tasks by themselves but need help with others. Individual differences will ensure that learners develop at different rates and with different emphases. This means that almost from the beginning, learners will be able to support one another in task performance. This is why group work plays a key role in any pedagogy derived from Vygotskian principles. In Vygotsky's definition of the zone of proximal development he relied on adults or more capable peers to take on a pedagogical role. In the principles of learner autonomy relating to group work this role is assumed first by one learner and then another in a complex structure of interdependence (Little, 2000).

Leni Dam indicates that in an autonomous classroom learners manage their group work by using their own resources. Leni Dam has built up some criteria that can be used when training learners in forming their own groups:

- Learners are allowed to choose partners by their preferences, those they work well with or they think they can learn from;
- Learners can choose partners they have seldom or never worked with before which provides variety in the group work, helps learners get to know one another and prevent cliques;
- Partners that have the same interests in different activities or materials,
- Partners that have certain abilities like good writing;
- Partners that can provide peer tutoring (Dam, 1995).

At the end of its task all the group members, together with the teacher, assess the group work by using the notes they made in their logbooks. This helps the learners make the connection between the goals they set collaboratively in the beginning, the strategies used to achieve them and the outcome, and put them into words. The learners assess their own contribution to solving the task and the group work. The experiences accumulated by different groups are shared with the whole class and the teacher, and together they try to find solutions to different problems and the most effective way to form groups (Dam, 1998).

At first the learners may form groups out of habit choosing to work with their friends, but as they get used to the format, different groups begin to appear. At the upper levels, the following criteria are a good frame of reference:

1. "What do I want to be better at? Why?
2. What do I want to do? Why?
3. Who would I like to work with? Why?" (Dam, 1995, p. 44).

Learning how to choose working partners increases learner awareness of, for example, their strengths, weaknesses and personal working style.

Successful group work can boost learner autonomy and help implement a different atmosphere in the classroom. A teacher has to be very much aware of how the group work is progressing and step in if necessary. Bad group work can do as much damage to morale as good group work can help it. It is important for teachers to give learners ample opportunity to develop good group work habits and they may have to work with the whole class regularly in setting up good group work principles.

4. Assessment

One of the cornerstones of implementing learner autonomy in the classroom is that learners are engaged in self-assessment, and that this assessment is taken into account by their teachers. In an autonomous classroom, the curriculum is learner- centered, and the natural consequences should be that the assessment is not only the teacher's responsibility, but also the learners. The goal of learner autonomy is to develop learners who know where they stand at any point in their language learning. They are acquainted with what tasks they can perform in the target language and approximately what linguistic range, fluency and accuracy they possess (Little, 2005).

4.1 Assessment in Icelandic schools

Assessment is defined as 'the act of collecting information and making judgments on a language learner's understanding of a language and his ability to use it.' (Nunan, 2003, p. 310) The National Curriculum for languages emphasizes the importance of using continuous-, self- and peer-assessment among other assessment methods, such as the European Language Portfolio (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007). Learners should be involved in the assessing process by being informed of why they are being assessed, what the results of the assessment mean, and how those results are going to be used (Nunan, 2003).

Summative assessments are often associated with standardized tests, for example, state assessments. However, they can also be used as a vital part of classroom projects. Formative assessment is a form of assessment to enhance teaching and learning. When teachers use formative assessment learners are involved in the assessment process. Teachers give learners descriptive feedback on their learning to inform them what they are doing well and or what they need to improve upon. Formative assessment does not require a grade or a sticker (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2009).

The purpose of self and peer assessment is to develop the learners' capacity of assessing the outcome of their own learning and also their peers learning. Learners need to think about how they work and why they work the way they do. Garrison and

Ehringhaus (2009) consider that self and peer assessments promote the formation of a learning community within a classroom. Learners should be trained to think about their learning and assess themselves

The disadvantage of this form of assessment is that some learners in the class could have difficulties receiving criticism from their peers and that some learners might become malicious. This should be dealt with accordingly. Teachers should be cautious and selective about using this form of assessment. It is important to choose only groups of learners that are supportive of one another to avoid a disagreeable atmosphere in the classroom.

4.2 The European Language Portfolio

The ELP is defined as the best tool for promoting learner autonomy. It is a practical tool for those learners who learn or have learnt a language to reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences. It is also useful for those teachers who focus on developing autonomy in learners. In her study, Hanne Thomsen (2010) revealed that the portfolio helped learners talk about their learning experiences, and assume an active role in their learning. Learners could share with their peers their learning experiences by reflecting in writing on their thoughts and ideas. Portfolios are convenient tools for teachers in the process of getting to know the learners closely as individuals and as learners of English. In addition, it is useful when choosing strategies for individual learners or groups of learners (Thomsen, 2010).

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) supports the development of learner autonomy by self-assessment and goal setting. The learners are expected to record how they progress in the target language and any intercultural experiences they may have during the learning process (Little, 2005). ELP is a document kept by language learners, at school and outside school, to log and reflect on their learning and cultural experiences when learning a language. The portfolio is comprised of three parts: Language Passport, Language Biography and Dossier (Council of Europe, 2000).

The Language Passport also includes records of formal qualifications and describes language competence. It is the section in the portfolio the owner updates regularly.

The learner can match his language competence according to standard criteria accepted throughout Europe. It gives the opportunity for self-assessment, teacher assessment and school assessment. The information in the Language Passport expounds on what basis, when and by whom the assessment was conducted (Council of Europe, 2000). Summary and summative self-assessment are the forms of assessment required in the Language Passport. The self-assessment grid of the Council of Europe is "a central component in models designed for adults and adolescents" (Little, 2005).

The Language Biography enables learners to plan, reflect upon and assess their learning process and progress. The learner can keep a record of his language proficiency; reflect on linguistic and cultural experiences accumulated in a school setting or outside school (Council of Europe, 2000).

The Dossier is the third section in the Portfolio where the learner has the option of collecting documents to epitomize illustrated achievements or experiences from the Language Biography or Passport (Council of Europe, 2000). The form of assessment used in these sections is formative assessment, which uses goal setting and self-assessment checklists, and language samples justifying the critique recorded in the Biography (Little, 2005).

The ELP aims to motivate learners and help them keep a comprehensive record of their linguistic and cultural skills. It acknowledges their efforts to develop and diversify their language skills at all levels. One of its various objectives is to build up learners' motivation by improving their communicative skills in the target languages. This is achieved by the learners learning additional languages and searching for new intercultural experiences. ELP incites and helps learners reflect on their learning, plan ahead and learn autonomously. It also suggests alternative methods and procedures in language learning, such as contacts and visits, reading and the use of the media or projects (Council of Europe, 2000).

4.2.1 **The Finnish ELP project**

An example of ELP was the Finnish ELP pilot project conducted from 1998 to 2001. The primary purpose of this project was to increase learners' ownership of their language learning. The findings of the project showed that it was vital for the teacher who introduces learners to ELP to explain for what reason the learners need to assess and reflect on their own learning and communicative skills. The teacher's reasons for encouraging learners to assume responsibility for their work in the social classroom context also had to be made clear (Kohonen, 2007).

The project teachers gave learners ELP-orientated work to provide opportunities to assume responsibility for their own learning. Teachers provided learners with curriculum-related learning tasks appropriate for their age, learning skills and their level of proficiency in the target language. Teachers and learners partially negotiated the curriculum aims, contents and processes, which increased learners' responsibility for their own learning in small steps (Kohonen, 2007).

The results of the project indicated that learners were gradually becoming more responsible for their own learning and gave positive contributions to the group work. However, there were also learners who maintained their preferences for a teacher-directed teaching and rejected the whole idea of learner autonomy and self-assessment, considering it a waste of time. The teachers observed that ELP tasks and working procedures gave them the opportunity to make stronger personal relationships with their learners than before. By reading learners' logbooks, teachers became aware of their learners personal circumstances, interests, hopes and expectations in life. Learners found the moments the teachers spent with them personally and the individual feedback they received from the teachers useful and memorable. Those moments were also rewarding for the teachers (Kohonen, 2007).

The findings stressed the fact that is essential for teachers to fully understand the goals and how the ELP can be integrated with the national- or school curriculum in the classroom. By understanding the goals of ELP and putting them into practice in their language classes, the teachers developed new motivation from learners' growth and interest, and the learners experienced similar rewards and motivation. When they

understood the benefits of the ELP for their language learning, the learners found more motivation to take responsibility for their learning than before (Kohonen, 2007).

Every elementary school has its own policy in regards to assessment, but in many cases it is up to the teachers or departments what form of assessment they use. For the ESL/EFL autonomous classroom the portfolio is especially well suited for assessment. It may take some time for teachers to grow accustomed to it, and it requires more from them than traditional summative tests. That being said there is no reason not to include as many forms of assessment as the teacher sees fit. The more methods and types of assessments used the more likely it is that all learners' needs will be met.

5. Learner Autonomy and Differentiation in Icelandic Elementary Schools

Most Icelandic elementary schools follow certain educational ideologies or theories. It may seem difficult for a teacher to envision how to implement learner autonomy while staying true to the schools chosen policies. In this chapter, we shed light on how learner autonomy complements differentiation, as a mainstream educational idea in Icelandic schools.

Differentiation is a goal that many elementary schools in Iceland strive for. A teacher working in a school that supports differentiation has a strong ally in learner autonomy as these concepts are kindred spirits. Tomlinson defines differentiation instruction as a way to match instruction to learner need with the goal of maximizing the potential of each learner in a given area. Differentiating instruction is responsive instruction and can be directly linked to learner autonomy. The key factor in achieving this goal is the teacher. Responsive teachers are teachers who understand their learners as individuals. They become comfortable with the meaning and structures of the subject they teach, and teach flexibly in order to maximize learners' potential in that area (Tomlinson, 2003).

Ingvar Sigurgeirsson researched the ideology, emphasis and methods behind differentiation in Icelandic elementary schools, and from his findings it is clear to see how differentiation as we know it, goes hand in hand with learner autonomy (Ingvar Sigurgeirsson, 2005).

Differentiated education in Icelandic elementary schools emphasizes that learners accept responsibility for their own learning, and are exposed to varied creative work. Learners are given the power of choice and have the opportunities to take initiative regarding their learning. There is good cooperation between learners, parents and teachers and the teacher has the new role of a counselor (Ingvar Sigurgeirsson, 2005)**.**

The characteristics of a differentiated education are various: from collaborative learning, to peer assisted learning and use of learning centers and workshops.

Learners form flexible study groups and work independently on different projects on themes and integrated subjects. Differentiated education caters to learners of different skill levels with graded and differentiated assignments (Ingvar Sigurgeirsson, 2005).

It is clear that teachers that want to foster learner autonomy but still remain true to the official educational standard of their school have ample opportunity to implement autonomy while still staying true to the principles of differentiation. Differentiation is highly compatible with the theory of learner autonomy.

6. Successes and problems in implementing learner autonomy

Teachers working on implementing learner autonomy in their classrooms will encounter certain problems, but with sufficient preparation and good collaboration with learners, colleagues, administration and parents, any problem should be overcome. In the following chapter we will recount the successes of teachers that have successfully implemented learner autonomy in their classrooms. We will also bring up potential problems and possible solutions.

6.1 Success experienced by teachers when implementing learner autonomy

6.1.1 Tinne Seeman and Connie Tavares

Tinne Seeman and Connie Tavares are experienced English teachers that worked for years with strict routines dominated by textbooks and teacher's books. They found that both teachers and learners became tired of the rigid routine, even if the exercises and activities were engaging in themselves. In a sense the learners were only passive receivers most of the time and had no impact themselves on the content of the lesson. The lessons were entirely directed by the textbook and the teacher (Seeman & Tavares, 2000).

As the learners got older slightly more flexibility was offered. In the new series of textbooks they could choose from a variety of topics and within each topic they could choose different text types to work with. Typically they would work in pairs or groups. Once the learners had chosen a topic and text type, they followed a fixed pattern of activities as set out in the textbook. The teacher kept careful control of the learning goals specified by the textbook writers in the teacher's guide. The freedom the learners and teachers enjoyed was therefore somewhat limited (Seeman & Tavares, 2000).

In 1993 an education law was passed in Denmark which increased the emphasis on learner responsibility. At around the same time many teachers in Denmark, Seeman

and Tavares included, became aware of the theory and practice of learner autonomy through Leni Dam.

Seeman and Tavares were aware of potential problems in the move towards autonomy. A real fear among many teachers was that they would lose the respect of their learners' if they were not in complete control of the classroom. They also worried whether the learners would be capable of taking control or if things would simply unfurl into chaos. Another concern was how to cover all the material without following the textbook framework (Seeman & Tavares, 2000).

They soon realized that this change would not happen overnight and needed a lot of negotiation, trial and error. They found that it was essential for learners to establish functional and effective groups. This would only be done by letting go of control and having faith in the learners' abilities to take charge. When things did not go well, learners were able to learn from their own mistakes and accept responsibility for them. Everyone in turn could benefit from this shared knowledge and experience. Predictably, it turned out to be a lot easier to implement autonomy in classes where learners had experience from working in groups or pairs and assuming responsibility up to a point, for homework and presentations (Seeman & Tavares, 2000).

A significant factor in the successful move towards learner autonomy was a positive working environment where the administration and colleagues were on board and also participating in the changes. Through direct experience and reflection on experience, Seeman and Tavares came to grips with the autonomous learning processes in their classrooms, and they discovered what worked and did not work for them and their learners. What struck them was how excited the learners became about learning English when they were given the freedom to choose what they were working on. By setting their own goals they began to feel responsible for what they were doing and take control of their own learning. Being responsible also meant being particularly active as learners. This often led to considerable creativity, for example, the development of artistic and performance skills, important professional skills, or useful technical skills.

There were also positive consequences for the development of important social skills. Learners worked with different peers and learned a lot from each other. They learned to accept and respect one another's differences. Working together in an autonomous learning environment certainly helped to prepare learners with the vital and productive skills of cooperation, creativity and productivity, as well as the ability to adapt themselves to new conditions (Seeman & Tavares, 2000).

6.1.2 Hanne Thomsen

Hanne Thomsen worked for years with mixed-ability learners in autonomous language classrooms in Denmark. At the end, she realized that despite all her efforts her learners displayed the exact behavior she was trying to avoid. They expected to be entertained while learning English. In much the same way as Seeman and Tavares, she found her learners to be passive recipients and consumers largely dependent on their teacher. They did not want to take initiative in their learning, rather preferred to do as their teacher decided for them (Thomsen, 2000).

In 1981 she came across the notion of learner autonomy. At that time she was teaching a new German class which consisted of a familiar group of 13 year olds. Thanks to her collaboration with Leni Dam and Gerd Gabrielsen, she was able to identify two key issues that would affect her first attempts towards learner autonomy. The first issue was learner initiative. Focusing on learner initiative calls for the teacher to allow for different aspirations at the same time and that the teacher has to arrange the classroom environment and lesson plan accordingly.

The second issue was regarding assessment as an ongoing process. Learners are expected to reflect on the learning process while learning. This way they are meant to gradually gain insight into the learning process. Through their insight they will be able to answer the well known questions of "What", "Why", "How" and "What next", and also achieve a better and more refined level of departure for the next initiative (Thomsen, 2000).

Stressing learner initiative the way Thomsen does, means that the content of the teaching-learning process inevitably turns out differently in different classes within

the framework of the national curriculum and guidelines. The "What", "Why", and "How" are always genuine open questions that can be discussed and decided upon in cooperation. This approach makes the learning process much more active and unpredictable and also very personal (Thomsen, 2000).

6.1.3 Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen

Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen initiated the Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment (LAALE) project, in 1992. The purpose of the project was to follow the language development of one of Dam's classes over a period of several years. The Danish classes were systematically recorded and observed from the first days of learning English in the 5th grade to the end of the comprehensive level in the 9th grade. The participants were learners of mixed-ability, 10 girls and 11 boys. They received four English lessons weekly, and the duration of each class was 45 minutes. The participants of the study were compared with a control group which consisted of learners who followed a traditional, textbook-based syllabus. The traditional class was comprised of high-ability learners who attended a German grammar school (Gymnasium) (Legenhausen, 2000).

After testing the vocabulary acquisition of the learners in both groups, the Danish learners showed "a remarkable and superior ability to access their foreign vocabulary" (Legenhausen, 2000, p. 44). However, the German learners were more homogenous with the bottom ten learners scoring higher than the bottom Danish learners. In a traditional classroom, the learners are exposed to direct and systematic grammatical instruction. In a learner autonomous classroom, the learners "have to construct their grammatical knowledge themselves" (Legenhausen, 2000, p. 45).

The findings regarding grammatical proficiency showed that German learners were slightly better at asking stereotypical questions with "like" and "live" from the number of "to do" questions than the Danish learners. On the other hand, in the effort of using the language creatively, the autonomous learners performance improved compared to their previous performance, while the German learners' performance declined significantly from their previous results over time (Legenhausen, 2000).

Discourse behavior was another aspect of the language learning used to compare the two groups. German learners received a direct teaching on peer-to-peer talks about themselves, environment, etc. in previous lessons and, similar tasks were incorporated in the textbook approach they studied. The Danish learners did not receive any previous instructions concerning talking about themselves, but they were familiar with peer-to-peer talks in the form of an activity called "Two minutes talk" (Legenhausen, 2000).

The similarity between the two groups was that the learners chose to talk about similar topics. The main difference between the groups was in "how the various subtopics were introduced and dealt with" (Legenhausen, 2000, p. 48). The Danish learners attempted to expand and elaborate topics of interest even though they had limited language proficiency. Communicatively competent learners do not change the topics often during interactions with others, and use questions for maintaining and developing the topic. When the learners become more proficient they rely less on questions in introducing and continuing topics (Legenhausen, 2000).

Reading/writing skills were tested with a C-test, in which the second half of every second word has been deleted. This test was chosen because none of the learners had come across this testing format before. The results of the test indicated that, despite having had fewer lessons, almost half of the Danish autonomous learners were equally or more proficient than the German Gymnasium learners (Legenhausen, 2000).

The findings of this LAALE project go to show that a mixed ability class of autonomous learners can perform just as well or even better than a group of able students in a traditional learning environment. Autonomous learners have the same opportunities as traditional language learners when learning a foreign language even though they are doing it in a very different way. The main difference is that autonomous learners have used the language naturally and thus their language proficiency accelerated at a higher rate.

6.2 Problems encountered by teachers

When shifting the focus from teaching to learning specific problems can and will be encountered. Insecurities on the part of the teachers arise from the necessity to fulfill all the curricular demands and tests (Dam, 2000). Special concerns are to do with the exam system: "Am I keeping pace with other classes?" "Do my learners feel that they are making progress?" "How do I know that they are learning enough?" Teachers are also concerned about the reaction of weak and difficult learners. The weak learners will be the losers, and it might be demanding for learners to take hold and assume responsibility. It might be difficult for the teacher to let go and take risks with a new approach (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2002).

When learners plan their own work it can take a great deal of time, and with only a few English lessons per week this can be difficult. A solution may be to switch lessons with colleagues, or to arrange a special "English week" (Seeman & Tavares, 2000). Leni Dam (2000) also mentions problems that occur during the period that she was implementing learner autonomy in her classrooms, such as: the difficulty to manage a large number of learners, lack of time and chaos. Seeman and Tavares (2000) report the problem of the teacher not sticking to the daily plan. Problems usually occur when the learners work with logbooks. Some learners do not like writing and do not see the benefit of the logbooks (Dam, 2000). Weaker learners do poor note-taking and logbook-keeping (Seeman & Tavares, 2000).

Working in a group could raise certain difficulties between members. It demands a lot of cooperation, communication can and will break down, usually within a particular group. Seeman and Tavares (2000) also found that learners do not initiate dialogue in the target language and it can become problematic maintaining motivation in a mixed-ability environment (Seeman & Tavares, 2000).

Parents are an important factor in creating an autonomous classroom. They should be informed about the new approach of learning a language to understand the teacher's actions. Parents' as well as learners' expectations of the teacher run along the lines of: It is the teacher's job to teach. Parents' attitudes to "learning" and "teaching" could be directly related to the way they were taught.

The problems listed above are problems teachers have to confront in any foreign language classroom. The significant difference is that in a learning-centered environment, the teacher is not the only one responsible for solving problems. The teacher can introduce the problems to the class and open them to discussion (Dam, 2000),

Teachers might experience situations where they find themselves in the position of doing many things at once like scaffolding weak learners or finding additional materials (Lacey, 2007). Teachers in autonomous classrooms are no different from traditional teachers in one regard, they cannot be in two places at once. Leni Dam found a solution to this problem by sharing it with her learners and thus making them responsible for solving it with her. Together they came up with the idea of having a list of helpers. These were able learners willing to help their peers while Dam was busy elsewhere (Dam, 2000).

Irma Huttunen suggested that the real issue of the teachers trying to implement learner autonomy in their classrooms was the planning. She stressed that effective planning was the best way for teachers to overcome their worries concerning the syllabus and if they and their learners were keeping on track. She also suggested collaborative work between teachers to elaborate a master plan for three years of junior cycle. The teacher should negotiate rules and goals with learners, the European Language Portfolio could play a key role in this. The teacher should keep in mind that it is important to plan the teaching and learning activities for short and long periods of time. Planning ahead and gathering relevant material to different learning tasks beforehand could save time for teachers (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2002).

It is not the teacher's responsibility to force, beg or threaten learners into learning (Yang, 1998).

6.2.1 Discouraging environment

In a Japanese study conducted by Bill Holden and Miyuki Usuki in 1999, they tried to remedy the notion that Japanese learners were less autonomous than learners from other cultural backgrounds. Language teaching in Japanese schools is typically

teacher-centered and learners depend on memorization and mechanical approaches, such as a grammar-translation method for language learning. This learning environment discourages learners to get involved in their learning and developing their own learning strategies (Holden & Usuki, 1999).

Participants in the study were six groups of five to four Japanese college learners who were asked to respond individually to 13 questions in their native language. Holden and Usuki came to the conclusion that Japanese learners are not less autonomous, but "the educational and behavioral norms and the goals of language study in Japan" had the effect of discouraging learner autonomy (Holden & Usuki, 1999).

The study looked at the effect of the environment on the learners' behavior in their efforts to learn a foreign language. The findings showed that even though learners were aware of different meta-cognitive language learning strategies, they were unable to put them into practice. Learners preferred a classroom environment characteristic of the communicative approach to language teaching where they were allowed to express their thoughts and ideas and experiment with the target language. The findings also showed that the learners were more aware of the teacher's role than their own. However, learners wanted to be externally motivated and inspired by their teachers and did not try to find motivation in themselves, the learning process or material (Holden & Usuki, 1999).

6.2.2 **Reluctant teachers**

Educational planners and textbook authors can create a baggage of knowledge and skills that are transferred to learners by teachers. When governed by the textbooks, teachers are concerned primarily with the time they need to go through the units to be taught rather than with the time learners need to spend in achieving an acceptable proficiency in different areas of the target language. This thinking is remarkably widespread among teachers as Little discovered when giving seminars for language teachers in different European countries years ago. The participants in the seminar worked with different ways of using authentic printed texts for exploratory language learning which is aimed at learners with lower level proficiency skills (Little, 2000).

A class of language learners from a local school came and spent up to an hour and a half working through a chain of activities related to an authentic newspaper text in different ways. The learners were divided into groups of three or four. The groups of learners were observed by two of the seminar participants, and the rest of the teachers formed groups of three or four and dealt with the same chain of activities in another room. After the learners had returned to their school, the teachers discussed the activity chain. Typically the teachers that had worked on the activities themselves found them appealing but too difficult for their own learners. The teachers, on the other hand, that had worked with the local learners were surprised at how well they had coped (Little, 2000).

Most of the teachers did not think they would have the time to use these types of activities as they had too much ground to cover. They agreed, however, that it prompted fascinating learning behavior. This response was similar in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. It seems clear that this view is not bound to one country or educational culture. It is necessary to take into account how learners learn the language, not just focus on the material. Learning has a social and interactive nature. Learners learn by interacting with other people and the capacity to learn on their own derives from their experience of learning with and from others (Little, 2000).

Group work is one of the foundations of the learner autonomous environment. That being said it must be made clear that there is both good group work and bad group work. Two hours of purposeful discussion between colleagues can pull together the threads of a collaborative project, determine the direction of future work and give everyone a new enthusiasm for individual effort. Then again, two hours of ill-prepared and unfocussed talk can undermine a collaborative project and leave everyone feeling quite frustrated and uncooperative. Not everyone has the ability to take part in group work successfully. It depends on a combination of social and cognitive skills, which the individual members of any group will only possess in widely varying degrees. This is why knowing how to handle the gradual development of effective group dynamics is one of the fundamental skills required of a good teacher (Little, 2000).

7. Concluding remarks

Moving the focus from teaching to learning is not simple, easy or a change that happens overnight. It requires a different way of thinking about classroom dynamics and the roles of teachers, as well as learners. It requires a lot of planning and should be undertaken in association with learners, fellow teachers, administration and parents. For successful implementation of learner autonomy, it is important that all those concerned are aware of the rationale behind the different working, learning and assessment methods.

There are a number of tools that teachers and learners can use to facilitate autonomous learning. Logbooks are beneficial because they provide an overview of the learning process, the organization of group work and reflection thereupon. Posters also feature prominently in the autonomous classroom as ideas for activities, directives for logbook writing, and other information are displayed in the classroom for all to see. They also provide a lot of authentic target language examples. Homework is collaboratively decided and chosen by the learners themselves. Learners choose topics and projects for their studies, and the teacher serves both as a facilitator and a counselor. This way the learners take responsibility for their own learning and find motivation in fulfilling their personal goals.

Group work is a key factor in the learner autonomous classroom and something that many teachers struggle with. This is the part we find teachers need to prepare themselves for especially. Learners do not instinctively know how to successfully work in groups. They need training, and the teacher has to be vigilant in his supervision of group work in the beginning. As Seeman and Tavares found, it is easier to implement learner autonomy in classes that are used to pair and group work.

Reflection on the learning process is another key component of learner autonomy. By reflecting on the learning process, learners become aware of how and why they choose the methods and strategies they use in different projects, and for solving different tasks. Being aware of the learning process helps makes them autonomous.

Assessment methods in an autonomous classroom differ from traditional forms of assessment. Assessment is seen as a collaborative process between the teacher and the learners. The learners take an active role in the assessment process with self and peer assessment, group work assessment, portfolios and logbooks, which all play a significant part in pupils' language learning. Traditional assessment methods should not be entirely overlooked since they can be included in the assessment package. Diverse assessment methods cater to the needs of a diverse group of learners. The European Language Portfolio is familiar to most Icelandic elementary teachers and is therefore a good place to start to introduce learners to the idea of thinking about learning. It supplies different ways of getting learners to become aware of their learning process.

It is our conclusion that a lot of factors need to come together in order for learner autonomy to thrive. In Japan, although learners are open to more modern and active methods, the official educational policies discourage the move towards autonomy and promote more traditional methods. In Iceland and other European countries, however, official educational policies encourage the implementation of learner autonomy, but teachers tend to be more conservative and stick to methods they are familiar with. It is our belief that learners all over the world have the same capacity to embrace modern, communicative and autonomous methods despite vast cultural differences.

The main change that needs to be made for learner autonomy to be implemented is a change of disposition. The whole idea of teaching and learning needs to be revisited and reoriented. In the learner autonomous classroom teachers let go and learners take responsibility for their own learning and realize it is up to them if they want to learn. No teacher can force, threaten or beg their learners to learn; at least they will not be successful.

> *"The turn in your mind won't come about instantly like changing clothes. It will take a while and it will sometimes be an uphill struggle. But it is worth the effort. Once you get there you will have a whole new horizon opening up for you" (Aoki, 2008, p. 16).*

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