FOSTERING AUTONOMY FROM WITHIN THE CLASSROOM: 
THE TEACHER'S RESPONSIBILITY

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Autonomous language learning is justified by three arguments: the ideological, 
the psychological and the economic. There is increasing theoretical support for 
the psychological argument and language educators are working on the implications 
for curriculum development. There is now a considerable literature on training 
learners to use learning strategies but very little on autonomous learning as an 
approach to the curriculum as a whole. This paper addresses this issue by discussing 
how teachers might bridge the gap between public classroom activities and private 
learning activity. Firstly, it suggests that what is said about learning tasks in the 
classroom is an important signal of expectations of a learner’s role in learning. 
Secondly, it discusses the design of language learning tasks and how this design 
might be influenced by an orientation towards autonomous learning. It concludes 
by suggesting that, to achieve the goal of fostering autonomy, teachers need to 
examine critically all classroom practice from the perspective of independent 
learning.

WHY IS AUTONOMY DESIRABLE?

Autonomous learning is a concept that is attracting increasing attention in language 
education. It is generally justified by a combination of three arguments: the ideological, 
the psychological and the economic. The ideological argument is that the individual has 
the right to be free to exercise his or her own choices, in learning as in other areas, and 
not become a victim (even an unwitting one) of choices made by social institutions. Free 
individuals, the argument goes, make for a healthier, happier society. The psychological 
argument is simply that we learn better when we are in charge of our own learning. Learning 
is more meaningful, more permanent, more focussed on the processes and schemata of 
the individual when the individual is in charge. Being in charge may also increase motivation 
and a motivated learner is often a successful learner. The economic argument is that society 
does not have the resources to provide the level of personal instruction needed by all its 
members in every area of learning. Therefore individuals must be able to provide for their 
own learning needs, either individually or cooperatively, if they are to acquire the knowledge 
and skill they want.

The ideological argument has been given substance by the work of educationists like Freire 
(1972), working largely in Third World contexts to empower people to move out of poverty. 
The psychological argument draws support from work in cognitive psychology on learning
as a process of active problem-solving (Gagné, 1980) applied not only to content but to learning itself. It is an argument that takes into account the fact that learning is influenced by many variables and cannot be ensured simply by setting up tasks in the classroom. A learner needs to be aware of the learning process to make the most of it. The economic argument is important to those concerned with funding the increasing demand for education and training, and to those who are otherwise denied access to learning. Where classes exist, they are often too large for personal attention from teachers and, moreover, when courses end, learning has to go on. For an autonomous learner, the transition from class to no-class is not a major one.

Of these three arguments, the psychological is the most appealing to educationists in that it is pedagogical rather than political. The argument is not fully developed theoretically and it is not yet certain how educators might most effectively intervene to enhance the development of autonomy from a psychological point of view [see Derry and Murphy (1986) for a good review of the theories and issues]. Nevertheless, the perspective is an encouraging one. It does not present autonomy as a radical alternative to classroom-based learning [see Allwright (1988)]—it is to do with ensuring greater quality of learning by putting the control over learning in the place where the learning is occurring: the learner’s mind. It is of course a view of autonomy relevant to the learner working independently but it is just as relevant to the learner working within an institutional curriculum. Formal classroom activities do not in themselves guarantee language learning—success is dependent on the ways in which learners capitalize on opportunities inside and outside the classroom.

In the context of an institutional curriculum, this paper addresses the responsibility of teachers in relation to autonomous learning. Early studies of what good language learners do (Rubin, 1975; Naiman et al., 1978) contributed to a re-defining of the role of the teacher. These studies led to the study of specific learning and communication strategies, and how we might train learners in such strategies so that they can become better learners and more ready, therefore, for autonomy [see O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and Wenden (1991) as principal proponents of this direction]. This paper is concerned not with strategy training as a separate component in the curriculum but with the more global question of what existing aspects of the curriculum need to be attended to in order to foster autonomous learning. The particular question posed is whether the minute-by-minute classroom practice indirectly fosters or discourages autonomy. Do events in the classroom challenge or reinforce learners' expectations of their role, do they model individual learning behaviour, do they highlight choices within the curriculum? The important point behind these questions is that autonomy as a goal needs to pervade the whole curricular system and not simply be an occasional part of it. It is not uncommon, for example, for teachers to talk about autonomous learning in one part of the curriculum but to impose their own decisions in most classroom activities. Autonomous learning needs to become a reference point for all classroom procedure. In the rest of this paper I shall discuss the bridge between classroom and private learning activity, and then illustrate how this bridge might be made in two aspects of the curriculum at work: classroom discourse about tasks and the design of the tasks themselves.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DOMAINS OF LEARNING

It is helpful to conceive of shared classroom activities as taking place in the public domain...
of learning and the learner's personal learning activities as taking place in the private domain of learning. For a teacher who aims to foster autonomy, the focus of attention is on both of these domains and the interface between them. In other words, teachers need to think not unilaterally in terms of what learning activities to provide but bilaterally in terms of what learning activity the learner is transferring from the public domain to the private domain, and vice versa. Imagine, for example, that a teacher selects a classroom (public domain) reading activity, the objectives of which are to expose the learners to vocabulary and structures in context in the form of comprehensible input, and to provide a basis for fluency practice in the form of oral interaction. The teacher then designs the procedure for the task—what pre-reading focus will be provided, whether learners should read individually or cooperatively in some way, how the following discussion should be managed. If a number of such activities are included in the programme, they provide for a quantity of grammatical and lexical input, and fluency practice—a reasonable teaching strategy and one which is supported by current views of language learning. As it stands, however, the activity is merely a small episode in the students' experience of interpreting and expressing through English but not necessarily a small episode in the students' experience of understanding something about how language learning works. A teacher who is aiming to foster autonomous learning needs somehow to exploit the activity for generalizations about learning as well as generalizations about language. The learners need to perceive the elements of the task that are conducive to their learning and to perceive how they might manage the task or a similar task for themselves, possibly by themselves. The public-domain task, in short, should demonstrate something about learning so that it has relevance to the private domain. If teachers ignore the private domain of learning, those of their learners who do not know how to manage it are not likely to be successful in their language learning. [An interesting illustration of this is to be found in Huang and van Naerssen (1987), who established that the successful learners in an English language class in China were those who made sure they got functional practice outside the classroom.]

**TASK DYNAMICS IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DOMAINS**

If we wish our classroom tasks to demonstrate something about private learning, we have an immediate problem to overcome. This problem is that the dynamics of a task in the public domain are often different from the dynamics of a task in the private domain and this is likely to inhibit the establishment of a relationship between the two. To illustrate this, I have taken a typical task (Fig. 1) from a content-based EAP curriculum. Such curricula are based on particular topics such as The Greenhouse Effect, Information Technology or Earthquakes. Learners practise the use of language by processing and discussing ideas within these topics: language difficulties are largely dealt with as they occur. A task such as this one has a potential for demonstrating private-domain work but the potential will only be raised if the teacher takes account of the differences between the dynamics of this public task and other, parallel, private learning tasks. Six differences and the implications for fostering autonomy are considered below:

(i) **In the public domain, tasks are largely initiated by the teacher to meet supposed common learning needs. In the private domain they need to be initiated by the learner to meet specific needs.**
Task One

Look at Resource Sheet 1.

1. Scan the text and find a definition of information technology. Draw a simple diagram to represent this definition. Compare your diagram with that of your neighbour.

2. Now quickly read the whole text. What are the two technologies that have enabled the information technology revolution to take place?

3. Briefly tell your group what the role of information technology is in your specific area or in your life in general.

Fig. 1. Content-based task from a study theme on Information Technology.

Tasks such as the one illustrated are initiated by the teacher as a part of the classroom agenda. The teacher usually has a particular end in mind (unless he or she is merely filling the time up with fashionable activity). This particular task, for example, can be seen as an attempt to get learners to interpret text accurately, practise the skill of scanning for information and to practise fluency in reading in an area related to the learners' own projected use of English. In a sense, the learners are being offered the task as a "treatment". The problem in so many classrooms is that they are not necessarily aware of what the treatment is for. An efficient private-domain dynamic works the other way: it starts by identifying an end (such as reading academic text with greater comprehension) and works out the means to achieve that end. To foster this process of defining ends and establishing appropriate means, the learners need to be sensitive to the thinking behind the initiation of particular tasks. This would require a dialogue in the classroom to establish the learning problem that the activity is intended to address.

(ii) In the public domain, language practice is often done with other learners or the teacher. Strategies to achieve private work are not always modelled. In the private domain, practice is either done alone or with interlocutors that need to be sought out.

The dynamic of this task and tasks like it, is based on group relationships. As the task is written, the division between activity that is done alone and activity that is done in groups is probably something like the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>In groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Scan the text</td>
<td>(3) Compare your answer with your neighbour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Draw a diagram</td>
<td>(5) Whole-class feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Read the text</td>
<td>(6) Report to your group on your experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In most classes, very little attention is paid by the teacher to the activities done alone. Most of the individual attention is given over to explaining what to do (for those who have not understood) rather than how to do it. Moreover, the activities done alone are often subverted by the pressure to get on to the activities done in a group. This tendency, whether it is justified or not on pedagogic grounds, does little to prepare learners for the dynamics of working alone. To make a bridge between the public domain and the private domain, a teacher needs to pay more attention to how individuals are proceeding in private work, what strategies they are or could be using, whether they are working with a clear sense of purpose [see (i) above]. Again, this means more dialogue in the classroom about learning and the provision of time for it to happen.

(iii) **In the public domain, tasks that focus on content (fluency tasks) do not always reveal how to deal with language difficulties that arise. In the private domain, the learner’s attention is often likely to be on meeting accuracy problems.**

Typically, in content tasks, there is a pressure to extract the meaning from, say, a reading text and to get on to the next part of the task, sometimes because the rest of the group is waiting. Often what has arisen for individuals are problems with accuracy—the meaning of a particular word, the sense of an unfamiliar structure. These are private learning domain problems but in content-focussed tasks there is rarely an indication of what can be done to solve them. Sometimes, a supporting vocabulary or grammar exercise will be provided by the materials or the teacher but this is not problem-solving by the learners so much as problem-predicting by the teacher or the materials writer. Problems that are actually experienced need to be identified in the public domain and strategies need to be discussed—for example, strategies for guessing meaning, for using the dictionary, for remembering words and phrases. This focus on strategies when they are required is different from general strategy training as a separate part of the curriculum.

(iv) **In the public domain, decisions on how to go about doing a task are often made by someone else (a teacher or a dominant peer). This is likely to mean that there is no individual ownership of the task. In the private domain, decisions need to be made by the individual learner.**

In language classrooms, individual learners are not likely to be involved in the conceptualization of the task, in deciding what procedure to follow in completing the task and how much time should be spent on the different parts of the task. The way tasks are written into materials very often loads them towards the non-involvement of learners in the decision-making process. This point is illustrated by the instruction in the Fig. 1 task to “scan the text and find a definition of information technology”. Scanning is a strategy to solve a particular problem. It is a part of the teacher’s view of the reading as a process. If the goal is to build up the learner’s strategic competence then there is no point in simply practising the strategy as a skill. In the private domain the learner has to identify the strategy as being related to a particular problem in order to make sense of it. The problem in this case is how to find something quickly in a text.
Similarly, if the teacher identifies vocabulary to be focussed on after the reading task, there is little encouragement of the learner to become engaged in identifying useful vocabulary and to find an effective way of reviewing it.

(v) In public-domain activity, the teacher provides feedback on performance even without being asked for it. In the private domain, learners need to seek out specific feedback on specific performance when they think they need it.

In the particular public-domain task illustrated, feedback on content and therefore, indirectly, on language interpretation and expression, is designed into the task. Such feedback is dependent on the presence of the teacher as a fluent speaker and other learners, and it would be misleading to think that an autonomous learner can work without the support of other speakers. What is necessary, however, is to enhance the process of seeking feedback. In the private domain, learners need to be able to evaluate critically whether they might be right or wrong, to evaluate their performance against that of a fluent speaker on the same task, to develop a sense of where transfer from the first language is likely to work, to know at what point it is efficient to seek help from a fluent speaker and so on. Public domains typically provide no time to make such processes salient.

(vi) In the public domain the input texts for tasks are normally preselected and become an intrinsic part of the task. In the private domain, a learner often needs to work with unedited text for learning activity.

Input texts are the raw material around which teachers develop tasks. By the time learners see them as texts in the public domain, they have been selected, cut down to suitable lengths for the classroom, matched with other texts on a similar or related topic, edited and even simplified. An autonomous learner, working in the private domain, has access to a wide range of text that has not been so processed. He or she needs to know how to exploit such text without being put off by the length, the complexity or the sections that demand specific background knowledge. Again, classroom tasks rarely model possible ways of dealing with such text. The teacher’s or materials writer’s process of selection is invisible.

In summary, it is clear that the way in which tasks are set up in the public domain provides very little modelling to the learner for private-domain work. In order to support autonomous learning, therefore, something needs to be done to get beyond the dynamics of public tasks to the dynamic of private-domain tasks. In the next section, I shall make some suggestions as to how this might be done.

PROMOTING AUTONOMY THROUGH CLASSROOM DISCOURSE ABOUT TASKS AND THE DESIGN OF TASKS

If the above conceptualisation of the problem is correct, there are two aspects of the curriculum we need to focus on in order to foster autonomy. One is what the teacher says about classroom tasks as learning activity. The other is the actual design of tasks and whether
they have any element that models learning activity. Initial attempts at working in these two areas are encouraging.\textsuperscript{2} Some of the solutions are already part of good language teaching practice but a general impression of language classes is that they are not very widespread.

\textit{Classroom discourse about tasks}

It is clear that, in order for autonomy to be developed, it is crucial that teachers think carefully about what they are saying to learners about learning. Authors on autonomous learning have pointed this out and described the skills needed to hold \textquotedblleft learning conversations\textquotedblright{} (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1990). Data collected so far indicate that typical classroom discourse does not include much focus on learning. For example, when introducing a new task, a teacher may typically say something like the following:\textsuperscript{3}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Teacher:} OK, well, I’ve got another piece of reading here. Some of you may have heard of \textit{Guide for New Settlers}. There’s a section on specific social events—what you should do in situations. What I want you to do is not read it in detail but to scan it for the questions I have given you. There are headings that will help you find where the information is. I’ll ask you to do this as quickly as possible and finish in 15 minutes.
\end{center}

As an introduction to a task, there is little or no orientation to the learning aspect of the task. Why, for example, does the teacher not want the learners to read in detail and why is it important to scan? Scanning is being practised here as a skill, perhaps, but it is not being elicited (or even presented) as a strategy to solve a specific type of reading problem.

Again in the next statement, why is the learner not to read the whole text?

\begin{center}
\textbf{Teacher:} [To one student] Excuse me J you don’t need to read the whole thing from start to finish. You look at the questions first and then try to find the answers.
\end{center}

The teacher’s intention appears to be to keep the learner on task as defined by the teacher. Again there is no reason given for the directive. An opportunity to tell a learner about a strategy for reading is missed. (A problem may not have arisen if the task had been discussed as a learning task in the first place.) A final example of a similar kind will be enough to make the point clear.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Teacher:} Don’t put that text away ’cause I just want you to quickly do a pronoun reference search.
\end{center}

This is a signal to follow an established routine but it contains no orientation to the learning implicit in the task (and no further orientation was given). Why is this task, a \textquotedblleft pronoun reference search\textquotedblright{}, being done, what is its goal and does it really meet a learning need that the students have and perceive themselves as having?

Looking at statements like this, it is obvious that the teacher is intent on getting the set task done and is guiding students in order to do this. The public-domain activity is all
and it is probably a fault of many teacher education courses that they reinforce a schema of a classroom as the place where all the learning takes place, given the right conditions. This leads to a very low occurrence of advice or modelling to learners on what they should do in the private domain of learning.

The following conclusions may be drawn from these observations: in classroom discourse about tasks, in order to achieve metacognitive understanding, it is important to negotiate about aspects of learning to the point that shared knowledge is established. If this is done, it seems more likely that there will be a transfer of learning about learning from the public domain to the private domain. The classroom negotiation might be about the purposes of tasks, about the nature of the difficulties (linguistic or strategic) that are experienced in doing the task and about appropriate learning and communication strategies to meet those difficulties. These three areas sum up an important part of the ability to be an autonomous learner. Firstly, it is important for learners to be able to perceive a match between a particular type of activity and a particular learning purpose already identified. Secondly, it is important for learners to be able to diagnose what their difficulties are in performing the task. If they have difficulty with listening, is it because the speaker is speaking too fast, is it because the learner does not have enough vocabulary, is it because the learner does not have enough background knowledge in the topic that is being spoken about? Each diagnosis suggests a different strategy. Thirdly, it is important for the learner to be able to select appropriate strategies to meet an identified communication difficulty or learning goal.

I know of no empirical evidence that classroom discourse about tasks leads to a positive change in attitudes or behaviour. Indeed, it could be difficult to demonstrate such a link. It is clear, however, that classroom discourse that does not make a connection with private-domain learning is unlikely to contribute to it and may even subvert it by mystifying the learning process as a classroom-based phenomenon.

Task design
If classroom discourse about tasks contributes to metacognitive awareness about learning through those tasks, task design can provide models of learning activity. Understanding of action develops out of concrete models of action. We need, therefore, to look critically at task design to decide how far it models independent learning procedures in addition to providing for group learning. How far, for example, does the task encourage learners to select their own input resources based on criteria of interest and difficulty? How far does the task demonstrate individual learning activity in order to improve accuracy or fluency? Does the task have a built-in element of feedback so that the learners are encouraged to self-assess their progress? These points can be illustrated by looking at two tasks, one that does not appear to foster autonomous learning and one that does.

Information gap activities, where one learner has some information and another learner has complementary information, and they have to communicate to share that information, are commonplace in language classrooms. They are designed to encourage communication of a type that is believed to lead to acquisition (Doughty and Pica, 1986). They are, however, firmly rooted in the public domain. Because they require special arrangements made by the teacher, they do not demonstrate directly to the learner what he or she might do to
learn in the private domain. The resources are pre-selected by the teacher so that an information gap can be created. The feedback within the task comes principally in the form of whether the communication is successful or not. The standard design of such tasks seems unlikely to contribute to learners' understanding of how to arrange and manage language learning for themselves (although a discussion of the underlying elements of the tasks could do so).

Tasks that are likely to model independent learning are characterized by certain features: the performance goal of the task is transparent; the task, or a version of it, is easily staged by someone working on their own; the learners are able to perceive improved performance in doing the task. I have discussed these features at greater length elsewhere (Crabbe, 1991). An example of such a task is the 4-3-2 activity [described in Nation (1989)]. This is a task in which learners speak for 4 min to a partner on a particular topic, listen to the partner do the same, change partners and repeat the talk but this time for 3 min, change partners once more and do the talk for 2 min. Experience with the task shows that it is easy for a learner to perceive in this activity improved performance in terms of fluency. Self-evaluation is thus enhanced through repeated performance. It seems to me that such a task is more likely to demonstrate to the learners what sort of action they can take on their own, with or without a partner. The learner can take any subject and practise a short "speech" on it until they feel confident in their fluency. They could then try the "speech" out on different listeners, particularly if the topic they have chosen is one that would naturally be part of conversation. It is not suggested that all learners will automatically see or act on this application of the classroom task but it is not difficult for a teacher to point out the link between the two domains in classroom discourse about the task.

Again, it is difficult to establish empirical evidence that tasks such as these, which model individual learning activity, lead to enhanced private-domain learning. In any case, the design is unlikely to be sufficient on its own; it would need to be complemented with classroom discourse about the task. Models are, however, a well-established element of learning and a teacher aiming to encourage autonomous learning needs to ensure that a range of private learning is modelled in the classroom. In many classrooms, this does not happen.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered how a teacher working within an institutional curriculum might work towards the goal of fostering autonomous learning behaviour in individual learners. The problem has been presented as to how to work across two different domains of learning. The public domain is the one that teachers are trained to deal with. The private domain is not usually well-attended to and yet it is arguably where a considerable part of the learning takes place. Some learners are already proficient private-domain workers, others are not and need to be shown how to be so. The discussion of the two areas of the curriculum, classroom discourse about tasks and the design of tasks indicates that there is scope for teachers to be more sensitive to classroom procedures in relation to the fostering of independent work. Teaching, like all other professions, relies on fixed procedures that become validated by the fact that most practitioners follow them. In language teaching,
such procedures were rarely designed to serve the needs of fostering autonomy and should therefore be re-evaluated by teachers and teacher educators to take account of an increasingly important perspective on language education.

NOTES

1“Curriculum” in this article is used to refer to the whole set of decisions made in relation to a course (objectives, materials and methods, evaluation). It is not used in the narrower sense of “syllabus”.

2Practical work in these two areas is currently being carried out on the English Proficiency Programme at the English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. This work is the subject of ongoing evaluation and will be reported on.

3All of the following teacher statements were recorded in a class for adult learners focussing on the theme: “Social Customs”.

4In practical terms, this is inevitably idealistic in that a teacher will not have the time to see such negotiation through in all instances with all learners. The aim, however, should be to establish some degree of shared knowledge with the individuals in the class.

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