



## AUTONOMY, SELF-DIRECTION AND SELF ACCESS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA

MARIE-JOSÉ GREMMO and PHILIP RILEY

*Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues (Crapel), Université Nancy 2,  
Nancy, France*

The terms “autonomy” and “self-direction” are being used more and more frequently in educational discussion. This article identifies and examines the ideas and historical contingencies which form the background to these developments, including minority rights movements, shifts in educational philosophy, reactions against behaviourism, linguistic pragmatism, wider access to education, increased internationalism, the commercialization of language provision and easier availability of educational technology.

A number of objections to “autonomy” (it could not work with children or adults of low educational attainment, nor for “difficult” languages, or in examination-led syllabuses) have largely been overcome. Research into a wide range of educational topics, such as learning styles and strategies, resource centres and counsellor and learner training has directly contributed to present practice. Much remains to be done, however, particularly if cultural variation in learning attitudes, roles and activities is to be taken into account and if “autonomy” and “self-direction” are to be situated and understood within the workings of the social knowledge system.

### 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The terms “autonomy”, “self-direction” and self-access are being used more and more frequently in educational discussion, as can easily be seen from the titles of numerous books published in recent years, including, for example:

Henry Holec, *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, (Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1979); *Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning: present fields of application*, (Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1988);

Leslie Dickinson, *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*, (CUP, 1989);

Sue Sheerin, *Self-access*, (OUP, 1988);

David Little (ed.), *Self-access Systems for Language Learning*, (Authentik, 1989);

Arthur Brookes and Peter Grundy, *Individualisation and Autonomy in Language learning*, (Modern English Publications, British Council, 1988);

David Gardner and Lindsay Miller, *Topics in Self-access*, (English Department, University of Hong Kong, 1994);

Edith Esch (ed.), *Self-Access and the Adult Language Learner*, (London, CILT, 1994).

Despite this close grouping of publications, it would be extremely foolhardy to try to trace these concepts back to any single source or date of origin, especially a recent one, since they have complex relationships with developments in philosophy, political science, psychology and sociology, stretching back many centuries in some cases. This is not really surprising, as both “language” and “learning” impinge on the widest possible range of phenomena. Moreover the capacity to think and act independently has always been highly regarded by most, if not all, of the world’s societies, even if in practice it has often been the privilege of an elite.

It would not be an oversimplification, however, to say that in the 20 to 25 years following the Second World War, the ideas of autonomy and self-direction became the subject of intense scrutiny, analysis and debate and that since that time they have gone on to become familiar elements in educational research and practice. What was considered at one time as a cranky affront to educational common sense is now often seen as a thoughtful and efficient alternative to traditional teaching. At best, the attitudes and ideas embodied in “autonomy” and “self-direction” have greatly enriched educational practice, at worst, they have become mere buzz-words.

Again, it would be impossible to draw up an exhaustive list of the various social contingencies and currents of thought which contributed to the emergence and spread of these ideas during the particular period in question. Nonetheless, some important factors can be identified, including:

(1) Firstly, the wave of minority rights movements. With the benefit of hindsight, it was inevitable that the values, motives and aims of “Women’s Libbers”, “Consumers”, “Ecologists”, “Gays” and the members of so many ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, should come to be focused on education, learning and schooling.

(2) A second factor was the reaction against behaviourism: the sterile hubris of a mechanistic psychology which dared to extrapolate from dumb animals to human beings was rejected by western societies with their renewed interest in the meaning and value of personal experience. This antideterminist stance translated into generalized opposition to the establishment and authority and a search for “alternatives” of every kind: alternative life-styles, medicine, politics, music, poetry and schooling. Alternative psychologies were also developed by people working outside the behaviouristic paradigm: educationalists, philosophers and linguists, among others.

(a) Among the educationists there were, of course, numerous differences, but there was also a convergence on the notion of learner-centredness. From their very different standpoints, Paolo Freire (1972), Ivan Illich (1970, 1973), Carl Rogers (1941, 1972), Bertrand Schwartz, John Trim (1978), Douglas Barnes (1976), Henri Holec (1979) all emphasized the importance of the learners’ role and participation in the educational process.

(b) Linguists and philosophers of language embarked on an immensely wide-ranging series of investigations, resulting in a plethora of sociolinguistic disciplines: speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Apel, 1976), discourse analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Cicourel, 1973), ethnomethodology, ethnolinguistics and the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972, 1974; Gumperz and Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1982), language in education (Labov, 1972; Trudgill, 1975; Halliday, 1973, 1976; Bourdieu, 1965; Habermas, 1979), the sociology of language (Fishman, 1972). Again despite many major theoretical and methodological differences, they shared a vision of language that was essentially pragmatic and social, language as “a tool for communication”, as the catchphrase had it, where individuals, with personal needs and intentions, learn to express *themselves* whilst, at the same time, as

competent members of their group, they share and maintain social reality. This approach to language provided the rationale for the “Communicative Approach” to language learning and teaching, with its emphasis on communicative functions, individual needs, social norms—and “autonomy” (for references, see the discussion of the work of the Council of Europe below).

- (c) Within the field of psychology itself, there were two distinct but not incompatible reactions against behaviourism: humanistic psychology and cognitive psychology (Ausubel, 1968; Bruner *et al.*, 1966; Donaldson, 1978). Both approaches emphasize learning as a process resulting in an extension of the range of meanings of which the individual is capable, as something learners do, rather than being done to them. Moreover, this active nature of the way individuals learn is also seen as essentially interactive, that is, social: this provides further support for both the methodology and aims of the communicative approach to language learning and teaching.

(3) The interest in minority rights which was identified earlier as one of the main factors contributing to the emergence of “autonomy” as an educational ideal, had a direct influence on the development of adult education in Europe. Probably the single most important manifestation of this influence was the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project, which was established in 1971 (Trim, 1978) and which for the first decade and more of its existence concentrated on the language needs of migrant workers. To a considerable extent, the Council’s project and ethos was a direct response to the conditions and expectations which gave rise to the “events” of 1968, first in France, then in other European countries and the USA. From its very inception, “autonomy” was an important element in the overall framework of the Council’s work: partly this was due to its logical entailment by the premises of the Communicative Approach, partly to the presence on the committee of experts of Yves Châlon. He brought to their work a commitment and depth of insight that left a permanent stamp, despite his tragically early death in 1972. Moreover, as founder of the CRAPEL, Châlon set in motion a series of projects implementing and investigating “autonomy” and “self-direction” which has continued to this day under Henri Holec, the present director of the CRAPEL and also long-time member of the Council’s Committee of Experts.

(4) Developments in technology have made an undeniable contribution to the spread of autonomy and self-success. The tape-recorder, the fast-copier, TV and the video-recorder, the computer, the photocopier, magazines, newspapers, fax and e-mail, all provide a rich variety of tools and techniques for the implementation of self-directed learning. In institutional terms, the facilities have been gathered together to form the resource centres (mediatheques, sound libraries, etc.) which will be discussed below. However, experience shows that the price of autonomy is eternal vigilance: there is a strong and repeated tendency for the introduction of some new technology by enthusiastic “technicians” to be accompanied by a retrograde and unreflecting pedagogy. A grammar drill on a computer is still a grammar drill and if learners are given little choice (or no training, which comes to the same thing) then it is a travesty to call their programmes “self-directed”. Those who deride theory are blinded by science. In the words of John Maynard Keynes, “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist”. *Mutis mutandis*, the same is true for language teachers.

(5) Since the Second World War, the demand for foreign languages has greatly increased, both qualitatively and quantitatively as a result of political developments (the European Union, the United

Nations), the rise of multinational corporations (Unilever, IBM, Renault, Shell) and easier travel and tourism. This burgeoning internationalism has favoured language learning of a non-scholastic type, partly because of differences in aims (languages for special purposes, tourism) partly because the constraints on adult learners are different from those on children. Attempts to circumvent those constraints have inevitably led to the adoption of more flexible learning programmes with varying degrees of learner-centredness and self-direction. Indeed, it is now no longer unusual for the education officer, for example, of a hospital or factory, to request institutions in the “language market” to establish resource centres, learning-training programmes or to organize self-directed learning systems without recourse to teacher-led classes. In the same way, publishers have been quick to react to this demand, not just by claiming that almost all the materials they produce nowadays are “suitable for autonomous study”, but also by providing the wide range of self-instructional materials in the form of weekly magazines and cassettes which can now be found in newsagents throughout the world. It is interesting to note that certain contingent characteristics of self-directed learning, such as the tendency to distinguish and to work separately on the various language skills, have been widely adopted in such publications, presumably because they have been found to satisfy commercial, practical and popular requirements. They practice what we preach.

(6) The commercialization of much language provision, together with the movement to heighten consumer awareness mentioned earlier, has also had an influence on the way the language learner’s role is perceived. No longer the passive recipient of institutional charity, the learner is seen as a consumer making informed choices in the market. This form of discourse is certainly not to everyone’s taste, but it is a clear indication of what is happening to public perceptions of and attitudes to educational institutions, practices and values.

(7) The vast increase in the school and university population which has resulted from wider access to education in many countries has encouraged the development of new educational structures for dealing with large numbers of learners. In numerous institutions, some form of self-directed learning with institutional support in the shape of counselling and resource centres, has been found helpful. It provides flexible alternatives to traditional approaches where, for example, all students were obliged to do five hours foreign language study per week. By allowing students to choose when, where and what to study and by distinguishing those who have already attained a satisfactory level from those who still have far to go, such approaches go at least part of the way towards resolving the ambiguity between qualitative and quantitative objectives in education.

## 2. SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: SOME OBJECTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

This brief overview of factors which have contributed to “autonomous” learning over the past half-century or so no doubt contains many omissions and over-simplifications. Moreover, it is difficult in this kind of article to capture the enthusiasm and excitement (as well as, it has to be said, the occasional heat and acrimony) which has characterized discussion in this field. One thing seems clear though; whereas even 20 years ago it was possible for sceptics to claim that there were numerous “no-go” areas for self-direction, areas where self-direction could not and had not been done, this is no longer the case. Where previously it was possible to claim that self-direction was impossible (a) with children, (b) with some “difficult” languages, (c) in institutions whose

courses are examination-led, (d) with adults of low educational level, and so on, all these problems have now been tackled in at least a reasonably successful way.

(a) Self-directed learning schemes were first developed with and for adults, which gave rise to the belief and objection that they were unsuitable for initial language training and could not work with children. However, schemes organized by secondary school teachers like Turid Trebbi and Rita Gjørven in Norway have demonstrated that self-directed learning is a perfectly viable approach in those contexts. Observations carried out by Leni Dam, for example, show that children benefit from a “learning to learn” approach: their level of achievement in the foreign language parallels that reached by children who have been taught, but their learning competence is much higher. The evidence is so compelling that most European educational authorities now have “developing the learner’s autonomy” included amongst the general objectives of their national curricula for modern languages.

(b) Again, as self-directed learning schemes were first developed in English as a foreign language, teachers of other languages tended to form the impression that they could only work for English, because English was so easy to learn. Here too, experiments in various countries involving different languages have shown this belief to be ill-founded. The degree of difficulty in *teaching* a foreign language is unrelated to the degree of difficulty in *learning* it, and practical experience has shown that a self-directed learning scheme providing a reasonable variety of methodological and linguistic resources can help learners to find their way through any foreign language. So, for example, the various Eurocentres all provide the same self-directed learning schemes (German in Zurich and Cologne, French in Lausanne and Paris, English in the UK). The Language Centre of the University of Cambridge offers self-directed learning for more than 40 different languages (Harding and Tealby, 1981). The University of Pamplona is setting up a resource centre for the learning of Basque, teachers at the Linguistics Institute of Ireland are developing a self-directed approach for learning Gaelic (both popularly reputed to be extremely “difficult” languages).

(c) Since self-directed learning schemes stress the importance of learner self-assessment, they were often presumed to be quite incompatible with learning structures and institutions which rely on examinations, especially national examinations. Where self-directed learning schemes have been tried out in such situations, though, they have been found to work quite well (Moulden, 1983). Experiments in institutional settings of this kind have also been fruitful in two additional ways. Firstly, they have helped teachers and learners alike realize that self-assessment and external certification/examination are two separate processes. Self-assessment is vital to the act of learning and has to be as accurate, thorough and relevant as possible: learners must learn to self-assess realistically. Examinations need not be done away with, but if they are to be integrated in a self-directed approach, it is essential that learners be fully aware of their objectives, conditions, criteria and expectations beforehand. Secondly, experiments with self-direction have led to a reappraisal of the concept of “examination” itself. There are now numerous cases where examinations are defined locally, sometimes at school-, sometimes at classroom-level. In some institutions, the final mark at the end of each school year is a combination of the teacher’s evaluation and the learner’s self-assessment. Indeed, some institutions are now taking self-directed learning schemes as the starting point for the organization of their foreign language training programmes. In France, for example, the recently created IUPs (Instituts Universitaires de Professionalisation) are recommending the establishment of self-directed learning schemes with resource centres as meeting their learners’ needs.

(d) Self-direction has been regarded by some people as suitable only for an educated elite, such as postgraduate students. However, the AMES (Australian Migrant Institute) has adopted a self-directed approach to working with migrants, many of them boat-people with low or no formal education, with satisfactory results (Willing, 1981; Race, 1985). Other experiments have shown that “learning to learn” can help unsuccessful pupils to overcome their feelings of frustration and failure: the Norwegian project “Strengthening the Second Foreign Language” (*Styrking av det andre fremmedspraket i grunnskolen*) has found that a self-directed approach really helps learners who are considered slow or below average to become more efficient. These have been shown to fare better with their second “difficult” foreign language (French or German) in self-direction than they had with their “easy” first foreign language (English), which was taught in the traditional classroom mode.

All in all, the work carried out over the past 20 years or so (only a small amount of which has been specifically referred to) justifies a reasonable amount of confidence and optimism. “Autonomous learning” has been shown to be a fruitful approach and one that impinges on every aspect of language learning theory and practice, in all parts of the world. However, one important lesson which has been learnt from this work is that self-directed learning schemes and resource centres have to be planned locally, taking into account specific institutional requirements and expectations, the particular characteristics of the learners and staff, including the sociocultural constraints on learning practices. There is no universal model for setting up a self-directed learning scheme, since all these parameters vary, but enough experience has been acquired, and enough research conducted, to put forward general guidelines and objectives which can be adapted to meet local needs. For example, although self-direction was originally part of European educational thinking, it has been adopted and adapted in many places in South East Asia (Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Japan, see Gardner and Miller, 1994), in Egypt and in Mexico.

### 3. SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: RESOURCE CENTRES, LEARNER TRAINING AND COUNSELLING, MATERIALS

The first resource centres and self-access systems were developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is not possible to be more precise than that because in some cases they evolved directly from existing language laboratories. As dissatisfaction with language labs increased, they were either neglected (often with considerable loss of face, due to the wildly optimistic claims which had been made for them, and to the expense involved), or, sometimes, they were opened in “library mode” (University of Malta, 1970) allowing a modest degree of self-access. Although the differences in terms of physical lay-out and equipment were minimal, the psychological and educational bases of “labs” and “libraries” could hardly have been more different, as labs were associated with a behaviouristic, lock-step approach whereas libraries were a manifestation—however limited to start with—of the ideas of “autonomous” and “self-directed” learning.

One of the first “tailor-made” resource centres was established by CRAPEL at the University of Nancy (Riley and Zoppis, 1974; also in Riley, 1986). It contained audio-active comparative equipment, to be used without teacher supervision; a listening-comprehension section; a video section, and a “table d’hôte” facility (a 45 minute recorded anthology, repeated continually and changed every week). Numerous installations of this type were set up in tertiary institutions and

language schools (The Bell College, Eurocentres, Migros, etc.) as well as in certain institutions such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This is still a major area of activity and growth within the field of language provision. CRAPEL alone has been involved in resource centre projects in Mexico, Hong Kong, Spain, Austria, and Egypt in the past five years, and no doubt the same is true of other institutions. In South East Asia, in particular, new resource centres seem to spring up daily (Miller, 1992), some of them, such as the Independent Learning Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, using the most sophisticated technology available (Pierson, 1992).

The major lesson which has been learnt from resource centres is that if they are to be successful, they must provide some sort of learner-training. A conceptual framework was developed in the late 1970s (Holec, 1980; Abé et Gremmo, 1983) and since then learner training has been the subject of intensive observation and research. This research has tended to follow one of two related paths.

Some researchers, mainly in the USA, have tried to analyse what successful language learners do when they learn a language so that the results could be extrapolated to and implemented in learner-training programmes. The idea behind such research was that there was a great deal to learn from learners themselves, as opposed to teachers, and teachers' experience. Researchers such as Rubin, Wenden and Meara (Rubin and Thompson, 1982) have carried out most interesting studies on successful learners' behaviour and on their attitudes towards language and language learning. "Practical" research of this kind, carried out in real educational contexts, found both an echo and an inspiration in more theoretical work on what is generally known as "learning style" (Duda and Riley, 1991; Bickley, 1989).

The principal research objective of people such as Witkin and Goodenough (1981), Pask (1976) and Kolb (1984) was to describe the learning process, i.e. the ways in which learners gather, process, analyse and store information in order to adapt safely to new realities and environments by solving problems and taking appropriate decisions. Research has shown that human beings are equipped with different mental tools for the different parts of the process: for gathering information, a number of strategies, going from a highly analytical, rule-building approach to a very intuitive context-linked approach are available; for storing information there are both formal and semantic strategies for linking new pieces of information to those sets of knowledge already in store; and there are ways of testing knowledge, going from immediate risk-taking to more organized, careful examination of hypotheses.

This notion of learning styles, then, enables us to describe and explain dysfunctions and delays in the learning process as the results of inadequate or inappropriate choice or use of particular learning processes. A further important finding was the fact that language teaching methodologies are by no means neutral as regards learning style, so that any given methodology favours certain categories of learners and disadvantages others. A grammar drill, translation methodology, for example will be more accessible and effective with learners who have analytic, serialist, rule-forming proclivities.

This line of research, in both its "concrete" and theoretical forms, has given us important insights into how learners behave. What it has not done, and this is a major concern for European didacticians working in the field of self-direction, is to show how its findings can be used to help train unsuccessful language learners. Two points need to be kept in mind when discussing the results

of such research: first, it shows that there are many different ways of being successful in language learning and that, as teachers already know, some of the factors involved lie outside “technical”, mental aspects of the learning process and can be beyond the learner’s control. As one male learner observed to one of the authors after taking a test on “How successful are you at learning languages?” in which it was stated that being female was an advantage, “Does that mean I might as well give up trying?”.

The second point is that successful language learners seem to do everything: sometimes they are adventurous, sometimes reflective, sometimes they like grammar books, sometimes they like talking to people, and so on. This means we should avoid categorizing learners in cut-and-dried (and immutable) categories (what Leslie Dickinson has called the “signs of the horoscope” approach). Instead, we should use the information and ideas from research on learning styles as a source for describing the categories, characteristics and criteria relevant to the tasks language learners have to tackle. In other words, we need to set up types of learning, not types of learners. In this perspective, the aim of learner-training is not to transform all learners into “successful” language learners, with the cognitive and psycho-social features which that research has identified, but rather to help learners to come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses, to learn a language efficiently in ways which are compatible with their personalities.

This is the route that other researchers have taken. Their aim is to define the content and the possible forms of learner training. Again it is interesting to note that research projects carried out against very different backgrounds have converged in this respect: learner-training programmes have been developed by people with little interest in self-directed learning or language learning. A case in point is the work of Thomas and Augstein at the Centre for the Study of Human Learning, Brunel University, London: their training aims at improving students’ academic skills and is very much teacher-controlled. Nonetheless, there are many common points between the design of their academic-skills courses and, say, CRAPEL’s “learning to learn” schemes. It is also worth noting that learner-training can be carried out in a strictly teaching environment as the title of Ken Willing’s book “Teaching How to Learn” clearly suggests.

A number of recent reports and articles (Gevers-Schmitt, 1992; Riley, 1989) have stressed the central role played in determining learning behaviour by learners’ beliefs and representations about language and language learning. Training learners to become competent as learners therefore means working on and with those *representations*: this is a slow process which entails moving back and forth from actual learning activities to periods of reflection and analysis. This is increasingly recognized as essential to the success of self-directed learner training programmes. Obviously, learner training must also include improving learners’ methodological resources (techniques and activities, criteria for selection of materials, etc.) but experience indicates that even when this aspect of learner training seems to advance rapidly, its success will be limited if there is no real change in conceptualization.

Working on learners’ representations of what language is, helping them to develop adequate ideas about language, which has always been an integral part of the autonomous approach, is now seen as part of language teaching, whether of the mother tongue or of foreign language. This can be seen, for example, in the “language awareness” movement in the UK (Hawkins, 1984) and in some of the stated objectives of the “early language learning” experiments run by the French educational authorities.

Historically speaking, counselling was the first form of learner training to appear: it was based on the desire and necessity of devising forms of learner-training that are not teacher-controlled. In the 1970s, this was perceived as a real need in a number of institutions and the development of self-directed language schemes was consequently given priority. Learners, it was and is argued, become more competent through learning: they learn to learn while learning a language. One common arrangement though is to separate the language learning sessions, in which the learners analyse their work, i.e. their progress in learning, not in language performance, with the assistance of an expert.

The development of both the theory and the practice of autonomy, and in particular of self-directed learning systems and resource centres has resulted in the emergence of a new pedagogical profession, that of “counsellor” (helper, tutor, adviser, etc.). Counsellors have two main roles: on the one hand, they help learners develop their learning competence, what Holec has called “knowing how to learn”. On the other hand, they set about creating the material conditions favourable to language learning, (Holec’s “being able to learn”), which in practice often means designing, establishing and running resource centres.

In most self-directed learning schemes, language learning and learning-to-learn were linked, with counsellors helping learners to develop their learning competence during separate counselling sessions, as has been noted above. During these sessions, counsellors have at least three functions (Gremmo, 1994). On the basis of what learners say, they may choose to provide:

- (a) conceptual information which will help learners to develop their representations, metalinguistic and metacognitive notions;
- (b) methodological information on topics such as materials and work techniques and planning programmes of work;
- (c) psychological support, acting mostly as a “benevolent outsider” who can help learners come to terms with their successes and failures.

A more recent development, in terms of both research and practice, is “learning to learn” sessions in which no reference is made to a specific foreign language (Gremmo, 1994).

From the beginning, it has been clear that being a counsellor is different from being a teacher and that this new pedagogical role implies a new professional competence. Over the years a considerable amount of research has been carried out with the aim of identifying, describing and analysing first what those differences are, but many other aspects of counsellor-learner discourse analysis, for example, still remain unexplored (Régent, 1993; Riley, forthcoming). The role of the counsellor, it now seems uncontroversial to state, is to help learners develop an adequate set of values, ideas and techniques in the fields of language and language learning.

The counsellor’s second task is to establish and manage the resource centre which is central to a self-directed learning system. A considerable amount of research has gone into establishing parameters for the selection and organization of materials to be made available to learners (Little, 1989; Holec, 1994; Riley, 1986; Dickinson, 1987; and Esch, 1994). This line of investigation

converges with recent technological developments and one does not need a crystal ball to see that this will continue to be a major area of growth in the next few years.

Used judiciously, information technology obviously has great advantages to offer. For example, the computer makes possible the cataloguing and retrieval of materials on the bases of configurations of descriptors far more numerous than any card-index could provide. Provided that the classification system is learner-friendly, which means in practice that the descriptors are accessible to learners and that they are relevant to both language and learning (see LAI, this volume), catalogues of this kind can play an important role in self-access systems and in learner-training. This has meant researching the ways in which learners go about choosing and using materials (Abé and Gremmo, 1983) and devising ways of “vulgarizing” technical linguistic concepts such as “speech act”, “register” or “genre”. An interesting variation involves the organization of computer-assisted choice procedures which accept the criteria learners use and then offer more expert criteria (Moulden, 1985).

However, some applications of educational technology are a real threat to both the understanding and practice of self-directed learning. It is perfectly possible to use highly sophisticated technology in a most directive, pedagogically retrograde way. CALL applications, far from being coextensive with self-directed learning as some of its enthusiasts seem to imagine are at best a useful but not essential tool, at worst thoroughly counter-productive. It is vital, in self-directed learning systems, that technology be at the service of the learners and not vice versa: many new devices have yet to prove their usefulness in language learning. For this reason, “hi-tech” facilities are not a high priority in setting up self-access systems. Although some resource centres are very impressive in technological terms, no technology has ever in itself helped anyone learn anything. The crucial elements in these systems are the learner-training and counselling services they offer. When learners in “hi-tech” resource centres are not trained to become competent autonomous learners, the centres risk the same fate as language laboratories suffered decades ago.

Equally important is the nature and quality of the material stocked in the resource centre. Experiments in various settings have shown that materials have to satisfy strict criteria as regards variety, accessibility and self-sufficiency (see Holec, 1994; Dickinson, 1987) and that ideally there should be a range of both pedagogical and authentic materials. Systems which offer only pedagogical materials cannot really be called “self-directed” as they do not in fact allow learners to use the selection criteria which they developed in counselling and training sessions to build up their personal work programmes. This remains true in those cases where, for example, textbooks are broken down into separate parts, at considerable expense in time and effort: their discourse and status, and the limits they place on learner selection and use remain unaltered.

A related problem which is on the increase as the ideas of autonomy and self-direction spread into schools, occurs when teachers use traditional textbooks, based on a completely teacher-centred approach as if they were suitable for self-directed learning. This usually means allowing the pupils to find their way through the book on their own. In the absence of any real learner-training, this is little better than “laissez-faire” and in our experience only results in confusion. It is not difficult to understand how such situations came about: in some countries it is difficult to obtain or have access to authentic documents, in others their use is limited by strict copyright legislation. A positive reaction to this state of affairs has been the publication of books containing materials

and activities which are suitable for use in self-direction. A precursor in the field was Richterich and Suter's *Cartes sur Table*, which provided teachers with ideas and documents for learner-training and French as a foreign language. Other examples are *Ecoute, écoute* (CRAPEL), which trains learners to identify specific learning objectives and provides relevant tasks, keys and transcripts, and Johansen and Kleppen's *Mistral*, which provides Norwegian teachers of French with suggestions and materials for the autonomous work their official curriculum requires: about a quarter of the chapters in the book is devoted to discussions, in Norwegian, of learning-to-learn issues. At the same time, a new niche in the publishing market has been created: books devoted to the development of foreign language learners' learning competence. Ellis and Sinclair's *Learning to Learn*, Ken Willing's *Teaching how to Learn* and Jean-Paul Narcy's *Comment mieux apprendre l'anglais* have all helped teachers interested in self-direction to grasp and implement practical and theoretical aspects of the approach.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: FUTURE RESEARCH

If "autonomy" and "self-direction" are to remain dynamic, motivating factors in the theory and practice of foreign language learning, rather than fossilizing into a method or a series of recipes, research and development of all kinds will have to continue. At present, there seems to be no shortage of either ideas or actual prospects. Many of the areas of research—materials, learning styles, learner-training—have already been referred to in this article, but we would like to conclude by mentioning two areas which we believe are particularly promising.

The first is the analysis of the discourse of counselling (Gremmo, 1994; Régent, 1993; Riley, 1994). A better understanding of what counsellors and learners do and say together will help improve counselling techniques and the training of counsellors through the identification of those discourse strategies which really are appropriate to the negotiation of learning decisions and outcomes in asymmetric discourse. It would also hopefully enable researchers to study learners' representations and beliefs about language and learning and to trace development in the training process itself as they are enclosed in the learners' interpretative repertoires. One only has to compare the richness of the literature on classroom discourse with the paucity of studies on counselling for language learning to realize just how much remains to be done in this field.

The second is to investigate the relevance of *innate intersubjectivity theory* for self-directed learning theory and practice. As that theory has been developed by Trevarthen (1988) and Braten (1991), it would seem to have the profoundest possible implications for learning in general and self-directed learning in particular: indeed, there are strong indications that self-directed learning is the only kind of learning there is, that the conditions referred to by terms like "autonomy" are necessary concomitants to the psycho-social constraints on cognition inherent in the human mind (Little, 1994; Riley, 1993).

Finally, it is important to keep in mind the fact that any form of self-directed learning scheme is an intervention in the social knowledge system, that is, in the set of structures and functions through which a society manages the creation, organization, distribution, legitimization and storage of knowledge. Any research project in this field, therefore, should be seen as at least potentially contributing to our understanding of social epistemology. Far from being hyper-abstract or irrelevant to practice, such knowledge is essential if we are to construct the conceptual framework

necessary for the *cross-cultural* studies of every possible kind which are so badly needed in this area. Only by consistently introducing a contrastive dimension in the design of research projects will it be possible to prevent the export in bulk values and approaches from one knowledge system to another by taking into account local needs and attitudes.

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