

FOCUS ON

“Taking the Elephant by the Tusks”: A Review of *Assessment and Autonomy in Language Learning*, Edited by Carol

Everhard and Linda Murphy, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

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“Assessment is very often the elephant in the room that everyone can see but nobody wants to mention,” writes Philip Benson in the Foreword to *Assessment and Autonomy in Language Learning*. This new anthology, edited and introduced by Carol Everhard and Linda Murphy (2015) “takes the elephant by the tusks” (p. viii). Six chapters of innovative theory-elaboration and research, together with an introduction by the editors and an epilogue by Sara Cotterall and Diane Malcolm, turn the spotlight on the difficult—and hence often ignored—relationship between assessment and autonomy. It has become widely accepted (especially in our SIG) that autonomy is a prerequisite for language learning. But is autonomy something that can be, or should be measured or assessed? Furthermore, if learner autonomy means that learners have control of all aspects of the learning process, how does that square with the requirement in most schools and universities that learners be assessed by their teachers? These are important questions for anyone who works in an educational institution—i.e., for all of us—to consider, and this book can serve as a very useful starting point for reflection, discussion, and, perhaps, new research and practice.

The chapters begin with Everhard’s wide-ranging review of the autonomy-assessment relationship in the learner autonomy literature. Admitting that it is a multidimensional construct, which makes it difficult to measure, she nevertheless offers a working definition of autonomy as

a way of being or sense of self achieved through cooperatively making decisions about learning, through access to both internal and external resources. The ability to exercise autonomy depends on particular dispositions and predispositions and fluctuates according to circumstances. (p. 11)

Far more elaborate than Holec’s famous definition of autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (1981, p. 3), this formulation takes account of more recent avenues of autonomy research such as learner identity, cooperative learning, and the effect of social context. It remains, however, true to Holec’s definition in its focus on the learner, their own sense of self, and their ability to take action or make decisions or change according to different circumstances. By learning to reflect and assess themselves, Everhard concludes, learners become more autonomous in ways that benefit all areas of their lives.

The following three chapters take up the challenge of assessing autonomy itself. The first of these three very different chapters is by Fumiko Murase, who developed a questionnaire in order to gain a quantitative measure of learner autonomy of university students in Japan. The Measuring Instrument for Learner Autonomy (MILLA) is a Likert-scale questionnaire based on a four-dimensional model of autonomy (technical, psychological, political and social-cultural). With the final version of the questionnaire comprising 113 test items distributed to 1517 students from 18 universities, Murase used the data she obtained to test the validity and reliability of the model, as well as to gain a better understanding of the construct of autonomy itself. What is intriguing about this study is the finding that there is a strong correlation between the psychological and political dimensions of autonomy, and Murase’s decision to respecify them as a single sub-dimension. My intuitive sense is that these

dimensions are basically contradictory, and I would be fascinated to see further exploration of what this correlation might mean.

The second chapter, “Assessing Learner Autonomy: A Dynamic Model” by Maria Giovanna Tassinari introduces a “dynamic and dialogical approach” to the assessment of autonomy. Like Murase, Tassinari presents her own model of autonomy, although whereas Murase’s model expresses what autonomy is, Tassinari’s is comprised of interconnected “components” that describe what learners do (e.g., managing my own learning, cooperating, evaluating, planning, etc.). These components are built into *descriptors*, which are derived from previous developed materials on strategies and autonomy, and which are listed in a task sheet that invites learners to evaluate their skill or willingness to learn a skill within any particular component. After a trial investigation of the model, a procedure was adopted at the author's university whereby learners advance through a series of steps in which they reflect on their experiences and use the assessment sheets to focus on components of the autonomy model that they would like to work on first on their own and subsequently in a session with an advisor.

The third chapter, “Assessment as Learner Autonomy” by Lucy Cooker offers yet another model of learner autonomy, one which, like Murase’s, also derives from statistical analysis. *Q Methodology*, a research method that combines subjective views of individuals through card sorting with statistical factor analysis, is used to identify six “modes” of autonomy, and these modes can then be used in a self-assessment exercise that enables learners to identify their own autonomy mode and the strengths and weaknesses within that mode, as well as to consider alternatives. Like Tassinari’s model, the modes of autonomy developed by Cooker are intended for formative self-assessment purposes as a tool of reflection and guide to decision-making about ongoing

self-development. The methods by which these assessment tools were created and the uses to which the authors have put them offer ample food for thought, and better still, the tools themselves—Murase’s MILLA questionnaire, Tassinari’s dynamic, dialogic checklist, and Cooker’s modes of autonomy are provided in appendixes or via links for the reader to copy or download and try out for themselves.

Following these chapters come two chapters that put a different spin on the relationship between assessment and autonomy. Rather than trying to measure autonomy, these chapters describe practices where the task of assessment in a formal educational context is given to, or shared with the learners. In “Peer- and Self-assessment of Oral Skills in Higher Education,” Everhard presents a study in which assessment of oral skills in a general EFL course was triangulated between teachers, peers and individual students’ self-assessment. Everhard’s carefully designed study revealed that there was remarkable consistency among the three different kinds of assessment, although the discrepancy of higher peer assessment in one group suggests that group dynamics might disrupt the criteria that is more successfully used for assessment elsewhere.

Finally, in “Autonomy in Assessment,” Linda Murphy describes an experiment conducted with materials based on Kolb’s learning cycle that were intended to help learners of French succeed in tutor-assessed assignments. The materials consisted of a skills audit, a self-assessment sheet, a reflection sheet, a tips sheet, and a skills sheet, all of which gave learners guidance on how to complete them. Tutors were asked to support this scheme by delivering the materials to their students and by explaining their function and hoped for benefits, but the scheme was entirely voluntary for both tutors and learners. An investigation into the reactions of tutors and learners was followed up by interviews with tutors and learners selected from among those who answered positively and those who had

answered negatively. Needless to say, both tutors and students who had answered positively found that they were beneficial not only in terms of enhancing learning, but also in improving communication between tutors and students. An encouraging finding, you might think, except that only one third of the students opted to do the self-assessments; two-thirds did not bother.

For me, this points to the heart of the problem of juxtaposing assessment and autonomy. The students in Murphy's study were given the autonomy to choose whether or not to undertake the guided self-assessment exercise that was provided, something that was intended, and indeed proved to be beneficial for their learning and their academic success, and the majority of the students exercised their autonomy by choosing not to do it. This is a quite different view of autonomy, however, to the one that tends to prevail throughout this collection. Rather than the learners' capacities and attitudes, this view focuses on the political dimension of autonomy whereby institutions, more than learner psychologies, determine the extent to which students can be autonomous.

The chapters in this book are written from the perspective of a range of different geographical and educational contexts, including self-access centres and mainstream language classes. Self-access centres, designed to maximise the learner's control over the learning process, are in this respect very different to compulsory general English language classes in a university curriculum. As a teacher working in the latter type of educational context, I have to grade my students, and although, like Everhard, I've tried giving responsibility for assessment to students or sharing it with them, it never feels comfortable. I do believe in learner autonomy, I talk about it in my classes, and I try to give students opportunities to take control over various aspects of the learning process. But then grading them at the end of the course feels like I've just snatched

control back again. It feels like a violation of autonomy.

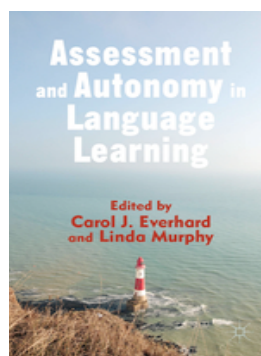
There is plenty to admire in this book and some good things to take away from it too. I was particularly impressed with the three theory-building chapters and now intend to try out Murase's MILLA questionnaire, Tassinari's dynamic and dialogic autonomy task-sheet, and Cooker's "modes of autonomy" materials. But I also liked the two chapters describing assessment-sharing practices, since this is where the subject and its inherent problems came most vividly to life. If there is anything to criticise, it is that, to my mind, there is too little account taken of the political dimension of autonomy. Autonomy may very well be a multi-dimensional construct, but assessment, when it is done by someone other than the learner, is fundamentally a political act. But there is much more to explore about the relationship between assessment and autonomy. This book sets an important precedent in highlighting the need to do so.

Reference

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press for Council of Europe.

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