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## Review: Review Alison Stewart

**Autonomy Ten Years On: A review of Phil Benson's *Teaching and Researching Autonomy (Second Edition)*. Published by Longman, 2011.**

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The first thing you notice about the two editions of Phil Benson's book on autonomy is the sheep. A slightly out-of-focus white sheep stares out of the cover of the first edition, *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning* (2001), whereas the second edition, now simply titled *Teaching and Researching Autonomy* (2011), bears on its cover a photograph of a handsome black ram standing majestically on a cliff against a backdrop of an aquamarine sea. These two images can be read as symbolic of a marked change that has occurred over the past ten years in the status

and reach of autonomy in Applied Linguistics and language education. The purpose of this new edition, as Benson explains in his introduction, is both to review "the vast quantity of literature published since the first edition was completed" and to account for how this growth is situated "in the changing contexts of language education and the social thought that surround it" (p. 4). These additions to the book signal an important development in Benson's own position on autonomy, and are a good reason for getting a copy of the new edition, even if you already own the first.

In outline, the two editions are much the same: although the readership of the book will be mainly researchers and teachers, the book in both its editions has some of the characteristics of a reference or textbook, in common with others in the Applied Linguistics in Action Series edited by Chris Candlin and David Hall. Its chapters are filled with stand-out textboxes of quotes and concepts that will be useful as discussion points in graduate classes. In both editions, the book is divided into four sections: I. What is Autonomy? II. Autonomy in Practice; III. Researching Autonomy; and IV. Resources. Within each section, some chapter and sub-section titles have been changed, and some subsections have been added. In *Autonomy in Practice*, for example, the section on resource-based approaches has been expanded to take in tandem learning, where two learners help each other to learn each other's language, distance education, and out-of-class learning, reflecting a new widespread emphasis on autonomous learning as a replacement or supplement to traditional classroom language learning. Another key change comes in *Researching Autonomy*, in which three of the six

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exemplary case studies have been published since 2001. However, in addition to these changes, the book as a whole has been carefully revised and updated, so that it offers a detailed reflection of the current state of theory, practice and research in the field.

Over the ten years since the first edition, Benson's view of autonomy has shifted in ways that are apparent or suggested throughout the book. Some of these are subtle changes of emphasis; for example, Chapter Three, which was titled Levels of Control in the first edition, now becomes Dimensions of Control in the second. Minor though it seems, this amendment is very much in keeping with Benson's cautious attitude towards the measurement of autonomy. Whereas "level" indicates a disembodied structural-hierarchical model, his new preferred term "dimension" denotes something much more complex and harder to delineate. In both editions, although Benson accords careful and respectful attention to efforts by researchers in the field to identify and describe autonomy, he is cautious and critical about the uses to which such descriptions might be put.

A more significant sign of the development of Benson's thinking comes in his critical account of how autonomy has been embraced by the mainstream of language education and what this means for the "specialized field of autonomy". His argument is presented in a substantial rewrite of the section, *Why autonomy? Why now?*, with which he concludes his first chapter on the history of autonomy in language education. Noting that a number of recent general guides to language teaching (e.g., Cameron, 2001; Harmer, 2001; Hedge, 2000) include sections on autonomy, he observes that autonomy is merely assumed to be a "good thing" and, as such, a necessary "part of language teachers' conceptual toolkit" (p. 18). But, as Benson argues, these are problematic assumptions to make. On the one hand,

such assumptions ignore wider social and ideological change, and on the other, they suggest that autonomy can be reduced to a method or approach that teachers can learn and then adapt to different learners and contexts.

Taking a broad perspective, Benson shows how autonomy has entered education as part of an ideological discourse that has emerged out of the specific socio-economic conditions of late capitalism. One critical social change that has been the focus of attention in a range of publications over the past decade has been the phenomenal growth in education, in particular distance and adult education. Partly, this can be explained by "the new work order", where people have come to see themselves as "shape-shifting portfolio people... free agents in charge of their own selves as if those selves were projects or businesses" (Gee, 2004, p. 105). This image of people as economic entities who can enhance their value, for example, by investing in education or training, carries a darker side as governments and corporations come to be less responsible for mitigating some of the financial and occupational insecurities that people face in a less stable world. In addition, individuals themselves have come to believe that the improvement of their lives, not only materially but psychologically too, is a matter over which they have considerable control (Cameron, 2002). This is an ideology that appears to elevate personal freedom, but overlooks the social and economic inequalities that make it so much harder for people who are not already socially advantaged to advance than those who are not.

This ideological discourse on autonomy has two troubling implications for education: Firstly, autonomy comes to be seen as merely a psychological rather than a political project. Benson cites Pennycook's warning that "broader political concerns about

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autonomy are increasingly replaced by concerns about how to develop strategies for learning autonomy (Pennycook, 1997, p. 41)". A second problem is that "the freedoms implied by learner autonomy are being reduced to consumer choices (p. 25)". Taking this view, Benson implicitly positions the field of autonomy at the radical edge of mainstream language education. But this is an awkward position to occupy, based as it is on an interpretation of autonomy that conflicts with that of institutions or practitioners who may be using autonomy in trivialized and uncritical ways, in other words, in ways that do not actually let learners take control over their learning.

Benson's critical definition of what autonomy is and what it isn't has become more focused, particularly in his response to and engagement with the considerable literature on social approaches to learning theory which have become increasingly influential in language learning over the past decade and to which he devotes a whole new section. Much of the literature that he cites does not deal directly with autonomy; indeed, as Benson notes, "this work seems to have been characterized by reluctance to engage with new ways of theorizing autonomy in language education (pp. 48-9)." One exception is Kelleen Toohey's (2007) commentary in Andy Barfield and Steve Brown's edited book, *Reconstructing Autonomy in Language Education*. Toohey objects to the notion of an autonomous, individual self that she sees as implicit in the term "autonomy", and continues to prefer the more socially-mediated construct of "agency". Benson takes issue with this objection, arguing that autonomy, like agency, is also socially mediated and constrained. His conceptualizations of agency, as "a factor in the learning process" and identity, as "one of its more important outcomes", would doubtless be criticized by specialists in those theoretical fields as overly narrow, or that autonomy as it is captured here is little more

than agency under a different name. The conclusion of this discussion rests on how autonomy, like identity and agency, needs to be seen as socially mediated and constrained. What is absent from Benson's positioning of autonomy in relation to these two theoretical constructs, however, is a clear sense of how autonomy is qualitatively different from them. There is surely more to be said here about the moral and political dimensions of autonomy that seem to me to be foregrounded in the construct of autonomy in a way that they are not in identity or agency.

This is a stimulating and wide-ranging book, and Benson's ability to make connections with a number of disciplines from within Applied Linguistics and beyond, together with his detailed coverage of new developments in the field of autonomy, make this a seminal work for those of us who seek to develop our understanding of autonomy and find better ways to promote it in our own contexts. Given that it includes so much, it is perhaps a little surprising to find a gap. David Little is frequently cited by Benson for his views on autonomy, but there is almost no mention of the work he has done with the Council of Europe Framework of Reference and European Language Portfolio, which many people regard as a significant attempt to incorporate the principles of learner autonomy on a transnational scale. As I have mentioned, Benson seems wary when it comes to the measurement of autonomy and the uses to which such categorizations might be put, and the scale and institutional interest in this project may be a good reason for keeping a critical distance. But rather than guessing, I would have liked to be able to read Benson's own account of this initiative and his evaluation of its relevance to learner autonomy.

Despite this gap, given the avalanche of publications and presentations on autonomy in the past decade, the range and clarity of this book

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represent a significant achievement. Benson is deservedly a leading figure of the varied and dynamic field of autonomy, and the new edition of his landmark book is an important commentary on the current state of this field and the challenges it faces.

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