Learner autonomy as a defensible educational goal in modern language education

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Resumen

La noción de autonomía del aprendiz se ha convertido en un pilar central de la educación durante los últimos años (véase Lamb y Reinders, 2008; Vieira, 2009; o Benson, 2011). Sin embargo, a pesar del consenso general sobre la importancia de promover el aprendizaje autónomo en el contexto escolar, existen voces que cuestionan la autonomía como un objetivo factible y deseable en el aula (Cuypers, 1992; Pennycook, 1997; Hand, 2006). El propósito del presente artículo es discutir por qué la autonomía del aprendiz constituye un objetivo educativo válido en la educación y, más concretamente, en la enseñanza de lenguas. De esta forma, comienza revisando las definiciones más relevantes del concepto de autonomía del aprendiz en la bibliografía especializada. A continuación, se centra en examinar algunas de las principales críticas formuladas contra la autonomía del aprendiz y en considerar diferentes razones que fundamentan la relevancia de este concepto en la educación de lenguas.

Palabras clave: autonomía del aprendiz, críticas, enseñanza de lenguas, aprendizaje permanente, educación democrática.

Abstract

The notion of learner autonomy has become a central pillar of education over the last years (see Lamb and Reinders, 2008; Vieira, 2009; or Benson, 2011). However, despite the general agreement on the importance of promoting autonomous learning in the school context, there are voices that question whether it is a feasible and desirable goal so as to be pursued in the classroom (e.g. Cuypers, 1992; Pennycook, 1997; Hand, 2006). The purpose of the present paper is to discuss why learner autonomy constitutes a defensible educational goal in education and, more specifically, in modern language education. Thus, the paper begins by reviewing some of the most relevant definitions of learner autonomy in the specialised literature. Next, it moves on to examine some of the main criticisms

which have been levelled against this concept. It concludes by considering different reasons which support the significance of learner autonomy in language education.

Keywords: learner autonomy, criticisms, language teaching, lifelong learning, democratic education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, language teaching policies have experienced a considerable change towards principles directly or indirectly related to the development of the autonomous learner (e.g. learner-centredness, self-directed learning, learner differentiation, learning to learn, and collaborative learning). One proof of the renewed and growing interest in the concept of learner autonomy (henceforth LA) is the literature on autonomous learning published since 2000, which exceeds the literature published on the topic over the previous 25 years (Benson, 2006). Nevertheless, controversy still exists as to the significance of LA as an educational goal to be pursued in the classroom. While some authors strongly argue that the notion of LA represents one of the central pillars on which future educational reforms, discourses and policies will continue to build (see Dam, 1995; Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira, 2007; Lamb and Reinders, 2008; Vieira, 2009; Benson, 2011; Manzano Vázquez, 2015), others question its feasibility and desirability in school settings (e.g. Cuypers, 1992; Pennycook, 1997; Hand, 2006). The major purpose of the present paper is to discuss the legitimacy of LA as a defensible educational goal in modern language education and education in general. In doing so, the paper begins by briefly considering what LA is and what it entails in the learning process. It then examines some of the major criticisms which have been voiced against this notion and explains why they can be challenged. To conclude, it discusses different reasons why LA should be promoted in the school context.

2. DEFINING AND DESCRIBING LA

The notion of LA has been defined in many different ways. This lack of consensus on what LA exactly means has made this concept become a catch-all term, comprising other concepts such as agency, motivation, awareness, lifelong learning, and cooperation. This section reviews some of the most relevant definitions of LA in the specialised literature and how they have contributed to the whole picture of autonomous learning.

One of the most influential theorists in the field of autonomous learning has been Holec (1981). His seminal book *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* has exceedingly contributed to the conception of LA in many language policies. In fact, his definition of LA

as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning"[1] (p. 3) still remains the most widely cited definition in the field. Holec further identified the various steps at which the self-directed learner is to be engaged throughout the autonomous learning process: learners themselves determine their learning goals; define the contents and pace of their learning; select their learning methods and techniques; monitor their own learning procedures and evaluate their learning outcomes. This first approach to defining LA was rooted in the development of self-access learning in university language learning centres and, for that reason, it just emphasised a more individualistic dimension of autonomous learning.

In the 90s, Little (1991, 1994, 1997) greatly contributed to the field by adding a distinct psychological dimension to the previous definition given by Holec (1981). His conception of LA laid more emphasis on the learner's individual control over the cognitive process taking place in learning. Thus, Little (1991: 4) defined LA as the learner's

> *capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts.*

The assumption here is that not only will the autonomous learner be able to develop the capacity to be responsible for all the decisions he/she makes concerning the learning process but also to apply the knowledge and abilities acquired beyond the pedagogical environment. More recently, one of the most interesting developments in the field of autonomous learning is the idea that there are different kinds of LA. Benson (2011) has distinguished three major versions or ways of representing the idea of LA for language learning. To the technical and psychological conceptions previously set forth (cf. Holec, 1981; Little, 1991), he has added a third one: the political version of LA. Here LA refers to the capacity to take control over the content and processes of one's own learning. In this sense, autonomy denotes self-government, that is, the capacity to rule oneself.

During a workshop on LA held in Bergen (Norway) in 1989, leading experts in the field of autonomy came up with what has become known as the 'Bergen definition': "learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person" (Dam, 1995: 1). One common belief about LA is that autonomous learning only takes place in

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[1] The quotations used throughout this paper are reproduced as taken from the original sources (i.e. respecting spelling, gender selection, etc.). Any modification is specified between brackets.

isolation. Various authors have used the term *independence* as a synonym for autonomy and, in fact, autonomous learning is often referred to in the literature as independent learning. The 'Bergen definition', however, broadened new horizons in the field as it underscores that the exercise of autonomy in the context of language learning has a social as well as an individual dimension. In other words, LA involves both independence and *interdependence*. Autonomous learning is not just working on and for one's own, but involves developing a learning environment where responsibility for the learning process is shared by means of cooperative learning and collective decision-making. Learners help one another learn, solve problems in constructive ways, participate responsibly in the decisions affecting the whole group, and work together towards the achievement of common goals.

Drawing on critical pedagogy, Jiménez Raya et al. (2007) have formulated perhaps one of the most comprehensive definitions of LA to date. They define it as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (p. 1). This definition adds a democratic value to LA, placing great emphasis on preparing learners to be active participants not only in the management of their own learning but also of their own lives. From this perspective, the notion of LA becomes a collective interest in the service of democracy whereby learners develop self-determination, social responsibility and critical awareness so as to take control over their learning process and participate critically in the society where they live.

More recent work in the field is leading to reconsider older conceptions of LA. One example is Illés (2012: 509) who presents a definition of LA which is "language use rather than learning driven". She argues that when developing LA, the emphasis should shift from aspects related to the learning process (e.g. setting learning objectives, monitoring learning, evaluating learning outcomes, etc.) to communicative processes since the teacher's main concern should be to develop learners' autonomy as *language users*. In other words, autonomy should become a means to prepare learners for future successful communication (e.g. coping with difficulties in language use, engaging in the negotiation of meaning, etc.). Nevertheless, this is a very restricted view of LA since, as it will be noted in section 4.1, emphasis on learners' control over their learning process is a key aspect in order to enable them to take charge of their learning throughout their lifetimes.

In sum, LA makes reference to a learner characteristic (defined either as an ability, capacity, or competence) which allows learners to take responsibility for and control over the learning process and everything it encompasses (e.g. goal-setting, decision-making, assessment, problem-solving, etc.), with the fundamental aim of enabling them to

participate and function effectively in a particular culture and society. The view of LA in language learning advocated in this paper identifies with a more social and democratic understanding of education in which learners develop their autonomy both individually and collaboratively. As noted above, LA has a well-defined individual dimension (Holec, 1981), but in the context of language learning, it cannot be exclusively developed in isolation. Learning a language is a social activity in which interaction, communication and interdependence are essential for the learning process. In the foreign language (FL) classroom, learners can develop their autonomy not only by means of taking control over one's own learning, but also by participating actively in and being committed to the welfare of the group, as well as assuming responsibility to cooperate with and help one another academically and socially. The next section addresses the major criticisms against LA in previous literature.

3. SOME CRITICISMS AGAINST LA AS AN EDUCATIONAL GOAL

Despite the many arguments supporting its development, the notion of LA is not exempt from criticism. Different views in the literature have questioned not only the feasibility but also the desirability of promoting autonomy in education and the school context. Nonetheless, these views can be challenged. Cuypers (1992), for instance, was one of the first authors to question the notion of autonomy as an educational goal. He argues that autonomy should not be regarded as the 'first principle' of education, but should be replaced by the basic idea of caring about oneself. His claim is that a person's identity is mainly constituted by the act of "caring about something" (p. 9) and this something is oneself, so this concern must become the immediate goal of educational practice. This view, however, is somewhat restricted since, as discussed below, identity is one of the most important outcomes of LA. When learners develop their autonomy, they have the opportunity to forge their own identity or, in other words, autonomy becomes a means for self-expression, self-discovery, and self-construction. Learners can communicate their own meanings and explore and define who they are as learners and, more specifically, as individuals (Little, 1994; Benson, 2012). In this sense, LA is a fundamental educational aim for learners' personal development.

Hand's (2006) criticisms against autonomy are more explicit than Cuypers'. He contends that we can distinguish between *circumstantial autonomy* (i.e. the freedom to determine one's own actions) and *dispositional autonomy* (i.e. the inclination to determine one's own actions), but he comes to the conclusion that "neither circumstantial autonomy nor dispositional autonomy will serve as an aim of education" (p. 539). On the one hand, he questions whether circumstantial autonomy can be actually taught in formal educational

contexts: "it is a state of being one cannot confer on a person by *educating* her" (p. 537, original italics). Nevertheless, this assumption can be regarded as erroneous since in the classroom the teacher can gradually enable learners to experience more freedom to think and act independently, so learners can eventually steer their own learning by taking increasing responsibility for it, making informed decisions, evaluating their learning outcomes, and so on. One proof is the positive results obtained in those studies which have promoted LA at classroom level (see section 4.4.).

Concerning dispositional autonomy, the question which arises when reading Hand's paper is: Do we want individuals to be able to determine their own actions? Or do we want them to wait for someone else to determine them? In this sense, Hand seems to support the second vision since the society he pictures in his work operates within a system of dependence (or heteronomy[2]):

> *since most of us spend much of our lives operating in spheres in which others have greater expertise than we do, and working in organisations in which others have authority over us, it would be nonsense to say that we ought always or generally to determine our own actions (p. 538).*

Thus, he considers that it is nonsense to determine our own actions when there is a person who possesses more expertise and can direct us, as it is the case of the teacher in the classroom. It is true that teachers have greater expertise and knowledge than learners regarding how to manage the learning process, but it is also true that they are not always going to be there for students to submit to their direction. As further discussed in the next section, learners need to learn how to be autonomous in order to direct their professional development once they leave school and to develop as self-determining citizens of the society where they live. For this particular reason, LA constitutes a perfectly defensible educational goal in our current educational system.

Another frequently voiced criticism has referred to the cultural appropriateness of autonomy. Riley (1988) suggests that the development of autonomy is ethnographic as some cultures are more or less suitable or favourable to the ideas and practices of learner-centred approaches. LA is often conceived as a construct deriving from the Western tradition of liberal thought and, consequently, an inappropriate pedagogical goal in non-Western educational contexts. Following this line of thought, for example, Jones (1995) challenges the idea that individual autonomy is a necessary goal in a self-access centre in Cambodia by questioning its supposed unsuitability in the Asian culture. Pennycook (1997: 43), on the other hand, contends that establishing LA as a universal need for all

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[2] Heteronomy makes reference to the subordination or subjection to an external law or force.

learners may become a cultural imposition: "the free, enlightened, liberal West bringing one more form of supposed emancipation to the unenlightened, traditional, backward and authoritarian classrooms of the world". Nonetheless, there are different research studies conducted in non-Western countries (e.g. China, Japan, and Hong Kong) whose findings show that many Asian students positively value freedom in language learning and the opportunity to direct their own learning process (see Lee, 1998; Littlewood, 2000; Ruan, 2006).

4.   ARGUMENTS FOR LA AS AN EDUCATIONAL GOAL

Over the last decades, the enactment of LA has become one of the most prominent educational goals in discussions dealing with modern language education. Notions such as education for life, education for lifelong learning and education for democratic citizenship are increasingly permeating educational rhetoric, thereby prompting the need to implement pedagogical principles which favour pedagogy for autonomy in the modern language classroom. In what follows, and as a response to the aforementioned criticisms towards the concept, the paper discusses the significance of LA as a worthwhile educational aim in the light of four major reasons: 1) the pressing need for enhancing lifelong learning in the knowledge-based society, 2) psychological perspectives supporting the promotion of LA, 3) the conception of LA as a democratic ideal and, finally, 4) the positive learning gains promoted by the development of LA in language education.

4.1   Need for lifelong learning in the knowledge-based society

The importance of LA as a necessary and relevant educational goal lies in the pressing need to promote a learning society which is ready, equipped and responsive to change. These days, contemporary society is witnessing how the use of new technologies is spreading and becoming part of our daily lives and how the volume of information continues to grow at an astonishing rate, with knowledge becoming outdated fast. Our world is, therefore, becoming more and more complex, constantly imposing new societal, cultural, political, and professional demands on the individual (Macaro, 2008). This means that learners will never be able to 'complete' their education and will be forced to embark upon a continuous process of retraining and acquisition of skills to deal with the complex challenges of our age. As the former European Commissioner for Education warned, the knowledge-based era urgently requires the implementation of a new paradigm in education: "the major future challenges in the educational field are how to reform our learning systems to prepare our young people for jobs that do not exist yet, using technologies that have not been invented yet, in order to solve problems that haven't been identified yet" (Jan Figel).

The notion of LA responds to the characteristics and requirements of this new paradigm. In this climate of impermanence, learners will find themselves in a society in which they will constantly need to learn new things, rely on their own resources, apply their knowledge to a variety of new contexts and circumstances, and be able to adapt flexibly to the constant changes the modern world is undergoing: the progressive globalisation, the increased need for plurilinguistic competences, the unstoppable growth of knowledge, the omnipresence of information and communication technologies, and so on. As a consequence, teaching cannot be exclusively focused upon transmitting concepts, theories and principles, but needs to put a higher premium on learners' striving for new competences and capacities typically associated with the notion of LA such as creativity, personal initiative, critical thinking, social responsibility, lifelong learning, decision-making and problem-solving skills (Aviram and Yonah, 2004). In this sense, the development of LA provides learners with the necessary means for adapting to a society in which they must be able to regulate their own learning and take full responsibility for their personal fulfilment.

The changing needs of the knowledge-based society definitely make the call for lifelong learning and permanent education a primary target of the educational system: "lifelong learning has become a necessity for all citizens" (European Commission, 2007: 1). Teachers cannot teach learners everything they need to know. Moreover, the rapid pace of change makes it difficult to predict the learning needs learners will have over the course of their lifetime. For that reason, and as opposed to Hand's (2006) view, learners must learn to be autonomous, self-directed and capable of developing personal learning strategies that help them improve their competences and abilities in the future. One of the fundamental aims of LA is to foster lifelong learning skills since its development creates in learners the disposition to assume both their learning and their professional development as a lifelong process that they will have to pursue on their own once they leave school.

4.2   Psychological premises supporting LA

Insights gained by various disciplines into motivation, cognitive development and human well-being have underpinned the development of autonomy as something essential and natural to human development. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2002, 2008) concludes that autonomy, together with competence and relatedness, is one of the three basic psychological needs which are intrinsic to human beings and must be satisfied in order to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment in life:

> *competence involves understanding how to attain various external and internal outcomes and being efficacious in performing the requisite actions; relatedness involves developing secure and satisfying connections*

> *with others in one's social milieu; and autonomy refers to being self-*
> *initiating and self-regulating of one's own actions (Deci et al., 1991: 327).*

The concept of LA in the school setting entails a degree of freedom to act and make informed choices without being constantly commanded by the teacher. Learners are given the opportunity to direct their learning procedures, act on their inherent interests, set their own objectives, and take the most relevant decisions concerning their learning. The result is that in autonomy-supportive learning environments learners identify more with the learning process, feel more responsible for reaching their learning goals, and have a genuine desire to learn (see, for example, the studies by Serrano Sampedro (1997), Vansteenkiste et al. (2004), and Dam (2011)). As Ushioda (2011: 224) accurately observes, LA "is a way of encouraging students to experience that sense of personal agency and self-determination that is vital to developing their motivation from within" and to keeping them in the path of learning. When autonomy is frustrated, the learner will inevitably experience diminished self-motivation, resistance to work, and gradual disengagement from learning.

Constructivist approaches have also contributed substantially to the prominence of LA in language education by conferring an active role in learning upon the learner. As opposed to positivist and behaviourist views of learning, constructivism is based on the claim that learning is more effective and meaningful when learners are active creators of their own knowledge and understanding of the world. It emphasises knowledge construction over knowledge reproduction. Rather than being passively presented to them, knowledge needs to be constructed by learners by bringing what they already know into interaction with the new information, ideas and experiences they encounter (Piaget, 1954). Constructivists have further emphasised that learning is primarily an active, experiential, reflective, and collaborative activity. This means that learners should be encouraged to be responsible for their learning, to reflect thoughtfully on experience, and to constantly assess their understanding within an interpersonal environment where learners learn with and from others. This social dimension elaborates on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and sociocultural theory. Explicit in his idea of the 'zone of proximal development', Vygotsky contended that the construction of knowledge occurs through interaction in the social world. Vygotsky's influence on the concept of autonomous learning lies mainly in the idea of collaboration (or interdependence) as a key factor in the development of autonomy. One of the ultimate aims of LA is to create a learning community in which all participants assume one's own and each other's learning as a collective responsibility.

Finally, a number of reasons for fostering LA have derived from humanistic approaches to education. Humanistic psychology, represented in the work of Rogers (1969) and Maslow

(1954), emphasises that both behaviour and experience are primarily initiated by the individual, and it is concerned with the enhancement of qualities such as personal choice, creativity, self-awareness, and the capacity to become free and responsible. Although Rogers (1969) used the term autonomy only in passing, he defended that meaningful learning must be self-initiated by the learner. To do this, the teacher has to promote active learner involvement in the learning process and draw learners' attention to how learning takes place (i.e. to learning to learn). In this way, learners can develop awareness of their learning process, the capacity to identify available opportunities for learning, and the ability to overcome possible obstacles in order to learn successfully. Maslow (1954), on the other hand, conceived of people as 'self-actualising' beings striving for health, individual identity, integrity, and autonomy, one of the highest aspirations in human life. Maslow's primary contribution to humanistic psychology was his 'hierarchy of needs'. He maintained that there are certain universal needs which are innate to human beings. The highest need in the hierarchy is what he called 'self-actualization': "the desire for self-fulfillment [...] the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (p. 93). As an educational goal, the development of LA aims to promote a non-threatening environment wherein learners feel secure and willing to participate actively in the learning process, become intrinsically motivated, have a sense of well-being, and be able to achieve their true potential.

4.3 LA as a democratic ideal

Developing LA is one of the most fundamental aims of democratic education as it comes to promote a "discourse of choice, freedom and democracy" in the language classroom (Marsh et al., 2001: 384). In more traditional approaches to teaching, the role of the teacher is perceived as central. Teachers typically shoulder most of the responsibility for the learning process and they are regarded as an authority figure, directing and controlling all learning in the classroom. The concept of LA, however, aims to change the power balance in the classroom, acknowledging learners' right to express their opinion about the learning process and have a voice in deciding what to learn and how to learn it. Furthermore, the promotion of autonomous learning fosters language programmes geared to the particular needs, motivations and characteristics of all learners. A pedagogy for LA makes the process of language learning more democratic by providing learners with the opportunity to participate in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of their learning as well as enabling them to control their own progress. Research, for example, has concluded that learners are not only capable of holding responsibility for their learning but they also value positively having a say in the classroom (see Dam, 1995; Serrano Sampedro, 2008).

In this way, they come to feel that they are part of the learning process and are more actively engaged in the management of their language study.

The chief purpose of democratic education and, in turn, of LA is to prepare learners for democratic citizenship. LA supports the development of attributes and values which will enable individuals to play a significant part in a democratic society and to choose for themselves how to live their own lives. By gaining more autonomy, learners can develop as free and self-determining citizens of the community in which they live. In this respect, *identity* is one of the most important outcomes of LA. Traditional approaches to language learning tend to construct the learner's self as a language learner. In other words, his/her goals, needs and learning process are established and controlled by others, normally, the teacher: "A student's sense of self as a learner is most often constructed against evaluative criteria over which they have no control and through a process in which they have virtually no negotiating rights" (Breen and Mann, 1997: 138). This situation may lead learners to feel completely alienated from the learning process. In contrast, the development of LA, as Benson (2011: 22) argues, involves "an ongoing sense of being in control of one's own identity [and development]". It allows learners to take full control of their personal growth as a learner and, ultimately, as a person:

> *Autonomy is not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations, or making pupils responsible for the activities they undertake, but of allowing and encouraging learners, through processes deliberately set up for the purpose, to begin to express who they are, what they think, and what they would like to do, in terms of work they initiate and define for themselves (Kenny, 1993: 440).*

4.4 Positive learning gains in the promotion of LA

Previous studies in the field of FL teaching have accounted for the effectiveness and positive results of learning programmes implemented to foster LA in the FL classroom. Dam and Legenhausen (1996, 2010) provide accounts of studies on autonomy and language learning in the secondary school context, showing that autonomous learning can be equally effective in terms of language proficiency as mainstream teacher-led approaches. In his different studies in the LAALE[3] project, Legenhausen (1999, 2001, 2003, 2010) presents strong arguments for the benefits of promoting LA. When comparing the results obtained in a 'traditional' class with an 'autonomous' class, he finds out that students following an autonomous learning approach have better linguistic achievements (e.g. grammatical proficiency, communicative competence, accuracy, etc.) than learners who follow a textbook-based communicative syllabus. Other relevant studies have

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[3] LAALE: Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment.

described how autonomous learning raises learners' critical awareness of their learning process. Lamb (1998), Jiménez Raya (1998) and Silva (2008) focus on developing learning strategy work in the classroom and conclude that by doing so, learners express a very conscious awareness of what learning a FL is and feel empowered to decide how and which way to go about learning in the future.

Fostering LA contributes to enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation and commitment to learning while decreasing their disaffection towards schooling. Dam (1995, 2006, 2011) in Denmark and Trebbi et al. (2008) in Norway have been highly successful in developing LA with young people learning English as a FL. They have experienced that by getting learners actively involved in planning and taking decisions about what they have to learn and how they have to learn it arouses their interest and motivation for learning the target language. Similarly, Lamb (2009) concludes that providing autonomy-supportive learning environments has significant effects for students becoming more fully dedicated and more genuinely engaged in learning activities and, consequently, the learning process. In the Spanish context, for example, Barbero Espinosa et al. (1991) and Serrano Sampedro (1997, 2008) have satisfactorily promoted LA in secondary education. They report that the result of the learning programmes set up was getting learners to be gradually less dependent on the teacher and develop a higher involvement in the learning process. Thus, learners started to show more interest in how to do things and how to learn, they expressed a greater concern for their work, they were able to adapt and design their own learning activities, and they contributed their ideas, suggestions and opinions about the learning process.

5   CONCLUSION

The need to transform school pedagogy so as to respond to the new societal and professional demands our present-day society is imposing on the individual has made educators and educational researchers alike enquire into how teaching can best prepare learners for life and lifelong learning. In this sense, the notion of LA has emerged as a basic pillar of future approaches to education and modern language education. The central argument of this paper has been that LA constitutes a valid educational concern as opposed to those voices (e.g. Cuypers, 1992; Pennycook, 1997; Hand, 2006) that question or raise serious doubts as to its appropriateness and relevance in formal school settings. Thus, the discussion has centred on four major reasons for fostering LA in language education: 1) the growing need for enhancing lifelong learning in the knowledge-based society; 2) basic psychological premises supporting LA; 3) the conception of LA as a

democratic value; and 4) the positive results yielded by the promotion of LA in the FL classroom.

However, in spite of the various arguments supporting it, there is a gap between theory and practice concerning LA, that is, its development is still far from being a reality in many schools and classroom practices (Miliander, 2008; Trebbi, 2008; Jiménez Raya, 2011; Manzano Vázquez, 2015). There are teachers who have not addressed the need for a deep re-conceptualisation of pedagogical approaches from a traditional model (i.e. passive consumption and reproduction of information, drilling, etc.) to a more learner-centred one in which learners can work both individually and collaboratively, assume responsibility for their learning process, build their own knowledge, realise their full potential, begin to express who they are, and be creators of their world. Fostering LA is not an easy task, but highly necessary if we want our learners to be better prepared for learning and life beyond the classroom.

To conclude, various courses of action for future work on LA are suggested. First, research is needed at classroom level to understand what potential constraints, obstacles, or dilemmas prevent teachers from assuming LA as an educational goal in language teaching and act accordingly. Second, the teacher has a crucial role to play in supporting learners to gain a degree of independence and providing them with the learning conditions and opportunities for exercising their autonomy. For that reason, both pre-service and in-service teacher education should be regarded as vital for the enactment of LA in teaching practice. We cannot expect teachers to develop autonomous learning in their classroom if they have not been previously trained to do so. In this respect, publications on autonomy have focused more on teaching and learning than on teacher education, and there is still the need to cope with the lack of teacher education programmes which aim to prepare teachers to foster LA (Benson, 2011; Manzano Vázquez, in press). Third, it is necessary to conduct follow-up studies which assess the long-term effects of learning programmes for LA, that is, whether or not learners continue to work autonomously in and beyond the classroom. Finally, further research in the field should explore the relationship between autonomy and concepts such as motivation or identity and how they can be enhanced by means of autonomous learning.

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