Learner Autonomy, Self-directed Learning and Assessment: Lessons from Swedish Experience

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Nineteen years ago, in 1988, was the first time I heard about self-directed learning in English or Learner Autonomy. This was at a course with Rigmor Eriksson, in which Leni Dam also participated. A few years earlier, Rigmor Eriksson had visited Leni at Karlslunde School just outside Copenhagen and in an article in *Lingua*, the Swedish language teachers' journal, she had reported on how the English teaching was organized at that school (Eriksson, 1984).

During the years that followed, the concept of Learner Autonomy spread like wildfire over Sweden. Looking in the rear-view mirror of history one may reflect on the strength and the intensity of the concept, especially considering that the persons most often associated with the concept in Sweden – Rigmor Eriksson, June Miliander and I – very seldom and only rather reluctantly used the term 'Learner Autonomy' itself. We preferred to talk about 'self-directed language learning'. Gradually the concept of Learner Autonomy became shallow and came to mean nearly anything that the teachers using it decided it would mean. Everything, from the students really participating in the planning, realization and evaluation of the teaching/learning process, to the students choosing between two different texts that were then dealt with traditionally, was designated as Learner Autonomy. This sweeping use of the term also came to mean the beginning of the end for the concept. If one today re-reads the books and articles that were published during this period it is obvious that the authors speak about an approach to language teaching and not about a method (see for example Thavenius, 1990; Eriksson & Miliander, 1991; Olsson, 1992; Tholin, 1992; Hanisch & Risholm, 1994; Eriksson & Tholin, 1997; Allström & Lundberg, 1998). But in many schools the concept came to mean a method which one could test for some time without having to reflect on one's role as a teacher or on what approach to knowledge the teaching was based upon. In a recently completed doctoral dissertation, Rebenius (2007) analyses what happened and how the concept was interpreted and how it may be re-interpreted and re-vitalised today. For hardly anyone speaks about Learner Autonomy in Sweden today. Does that mean that the ideas themselves have been played out? I don't believe so. Even if it's no longer fashionable to speak about Learner Autonomy or, for that matter, about self-directed learning in Sweden, I still believe that the ideas are very much alive in Swedish classrooms. The learners are today given greater possibilities to make their own choices. The idea that language teaching should contain elements which make the learners prepared to assume, and to handle, an increasing personal responsibility is an idea that is considered self-evident by most people today.

There is, thus, reason to critically reflect on how the ideas were communicated and spread during the 1990s. However, I see no reason to be critical of the ideas in themselves. Especially Enkvist (2000; 2005) has, during recent years, directed severe criticism at what she understands as Learner Autonomy. But the examples that she describes, in which the students get to do what they want, when they want to and in the way they want to, have really nothing to do with Learner Autonomy. This is more about teachers who have capitulated and who carry on a deficient form of teaching, irrespective of what label they then choose to put on it in order to disguise their own failings. Furthermore, one may ask how many teachers this concerns. During the last fifteen years I have travelled all over the country and I have met many of Sweden's language teachers. My picture of the situation is that the overwhelming majority of them are very professional and that they would never dream of letting their students drift aimlessly.

Self-directed language learning

What, then, are the basic ideas of self-directed language learning, a term I still insist on using? The ideas that I, in other words, still believe hold good. The most basic idea concerns the learners wanting to, and being able to, assume a great responsibility for their own learning. Learners are different, they learn in different ways. The idea that one teacher would be able to individualize the teaching in a manner that fits everybody is absurd. The learners must, instead, be jointly responsible in the processes of planning, carrying out and evaluating the teaching. These three concepts are central. They are, in addition, tightly integrated with each other. By evaluating their own learning, thinking about what has worked well and what can be improved, reflecting on one's own work effort, defining the goals for one's learning, and by planning for how the concrete continued work should proceed and finally evaluating these goals, the learners train their consciousness. In brief, to perform self-assessments and to draw conclusions from these is something that makes the students better at planning and learning in regard to new areas of the teaching.

In order for the learners to be able to do all this they need a teacher who consistently works with the development of the frameworks that are required for the teaching to be efficient. This means, paradoxically, that teaching which aims at great student participation, at least in the initial stage, may be very

strictly controlled by teachers. Eriksson and Miliander (1991) highlight this paradox in the title of their book: *Lärarstyrd elevplanerad engelska* [Teacher-guided self-directed learning].

Tools for language learning

To find concrete ways of working that lead to the learners getting into routines for planning, carrying out and evaluating their learning is, then, one of the tasks that falls upon a language teacher. But giving the learners an organizing framework for dealing with the work is not enough. They need, in addition, to get instruments and tools required for language learning which enable them to work more and more independently. Several teachers have described how they go about this task. Swedish examples can be found in the list of books and articles given above, but there are also examples from our Nordic neighbour countries. Dam (1995; 2003) offers examples from English teaching in Denmark, Fenner (1998) and Korsvold (2000) from Norway and Kohonen (2006) from Finland. Among the instruments and tools that I myself have worked with a lot with amongst my students are models for the learning of new words, and models for working with a text that the students have either listened to or read. What it is all about, in my case, is to find as many ideas as possible together with the students. And after that to get the students to test ideas and finally make an evaluation to the effect of finding out whether they have learnt anything from one model or the other. If the students have access to this kind of tool, there will be a greater possibility that they will make their own choices of, for example, what texts they want to work with. To learn new words and to possess a preparedness to work with a text are, I would say, the type of tools that the students will always need, irrespective of how they later on will work with their language learning. The learners are thus also given a preparedness to carry on their work with language learning after having finished school, an area that in my view is sadly neglected by language teaching in Sweden. Everybody agrees on the fact that school can only be a starting point for language learning. Languages are perishables, and to keep them alive one has to work actively with them. Despite the fact that everybody knows this a lot of language teaching is taking place as if this were not the case. School does not prepare students for lifelong language learning. Results of this may be observed in all those people who say things such as "I did actually study French for five years, but I don't remember any of it now." Have we equipped our students with the instruments and tools that they need for continued language learning? And have we managed to make them sufficiently independent of us as teachers to enable them to do it? These are questions which all of us language teachers should ask ourselves.

Learner roles and teacher roles

The changes in the teacher's role which the process of increasing learner influence brings about become plain when one studies dissertations dealing with the concept and its implementation. From Huttunen (1986), who describes experiences in a Finnish upper secondary school, and Eriksson (1993), who describes effects of teachers' further education, to Aoki (2003), who deals with learner autonomy in Japanese as a second language. Rebenius (2007) also deals with teacher roles even if, in her case, this is in relation to a special type of learner. She calls her/him the "rebellious autonomous student".

Today in Sweden it is popular to speak of the parts of teaching that are not regulated by the curriculum, parts that the school itself decides upon, "the free space". The teacher must be clear on what framework to use for the teaching and on what "free space" to give to the students. Because in order for the students to make relevant and sensible decisions they need to know what objectives they are expected to reach. They furthermore need to know how the teacher plans to do the assessments, as these assessments form the basis of the evaluation of the completion of objectives.

Assessment and self-directed planning

How would one then connect matters of assessment to self-directed planning? Erickson (2006) speaks of four different types of assessment:

- Self-assessment
- Peer assessment
- Teacher assessment
- External assessment

All of these are relevant when working with self-directed language learning.

As mentioned already, self-assessment is a natural element of self-directed learning. For the learners to be able to make choices that contribute to the development of their language abilities, they need to be conscious as learners. They will become so by continuously working with self-assessment. To make the learners capable of performing qualitative self-assessments and with these as starting points draw conclusions about how to proceed with their leaning is something that requires long-term and purposeful work.

Eriksson & Tholin (1997) describe how some teachers have set about doing this.The students work in groups in which they practise giving and receiving criticism to and from each other (Eriksson & Tholin, 1996). One way of doing this and one that I have personally employed in my classes is to let the students together examine texts that they have written; the diary entries that the students make in regard to what they have done during class are also used.

To let the teacher make the assessment (teacher assessment) is the most common way of

making assessments. It is important for the teacher to be clear on what objectives she or he will assess, and how this will be done. This applies not least to the aspects that resist more traditional assessments and tests. In these cases the teacher must make continuous assessments and here clarity is particularly important. It is a question of how and when the assessments will be made, so that the student will not always feel exposed to assessments, meaning then never having the possibility of trying things out and making mistakes.

In many other countries an "examination board" exists which assesses national examinations or final examinations, in other words external assessment. We don't have that in Sweden, but that doesn't mean that we can't turn to others for assistance in our assessments. Many teachers use co-examiners for the national examinations. But there is no reason to limit oneself to these examinations. To occasionally help each other, to correct each other's tests, or to make observations of each other's students and thereafter talk about what you saw, does not only mean that the security of the assessment increases, it also means that teachers develop a professional language for assessments.

In many schools there seems to be a change going on that means that teachers are choosing to do more continuous assessments instead of using more formal assessment occasions (Lindström, 2005; Tholin, 2008). To do continuous assessments is necessary to capture certain aspects of the learning, not least where the assessment concerns processes and not products, but great demands are made on the teacher involved. In these cases it is even more important for the teacher to clearly indicate what aspects are included in the assessment and how it is made. Otherwise there is a risk that the students get a feeling of being assessed the whole time and that they can't make mistakes or try something new. It is also important that the result of the assessment is documented by the teacher so that the learner can be informed of the result. One example of material which in a simple manner brings out both process and product and which includes a collaborative method of working is the assessment material for English that has been produced at the Division of Languages and Literature at Göteborg university (Skolverket, 2004).

So what lessons can be drawn from these experiences? The "rise and fall" of the concept of learner autonomy in Sweden can be seen as a reflection of a time where the need for quick-fix and easy solutions is so strong that many teachers really don't feel that they have the time to reflect upon a model of teaching that involves changes in fundamental views on, for example, the roles of teacher and pupils. On the other hand it can be argued that the concept of self-directed learning is so strong that it has survived and is making an impact in the language classroom even in the present, though this impact, in many cases, differs from the forms it took in the 1990s. Today in Sweden the impact is most noticeable in the area of assessment

and how we have come to regard assessment. A good assessment is not only an assessment *of* learning, it is also an assessment *for* learning. This kind of assessment, irrespective of who it is that performs it, contributes to the learner developing her/his consciousness, so that she or he is able to and desires to go on with learning. In this way there is a clear connection between self-directed learning and assessment, at least as far as I am concerned.

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