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Learner autonomy, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, the European Language Portfolio, and language teaching at university

Abstract

This paper begins by discussing two versions of the theoretical construct ‘learner autonomy’. Version 1 has played a role in second and foreign language teaching at universities since the 1980s, largely via self-access learning schemes. Version 2 has had far less impact at university level, though it rests on broader theoretical foundations than Version 1. The second part of the paper explains how the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* can be used to develop university L2 curricula informed by learner autonomy Version 2 and how the European Language Portfolio can support their implementation. Although my arguments have general relevance, for the sake of clarity I focus on foreign language degree programmes. In my conclusion I briefly recapitulate the argument of the paper and outline its implications for university L2 examinations and other assessment practices.

Two versions of learner autonomy

Version 1

The term ‘learner autonomy’ was introduced to the world of language teaching by Henri Holec in *Autonomy and foreign language learning*, a report commissioned by the Council of Europe and first published in 1979 (cited here as Holec 1981). Holec defines learner autonomy as the ‘ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (1981: 3):

> To take charge of one’s learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been acquired. (ibid.)

This is Version 1 of learner autonomy. The link between the Council of Europe and learner autonomy is not accidental. The Council of Europe was founded to defend human rights, parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, and its various educational policies and projects have all been concerned in one way or another with education for democratic citizenship. In the 1970s it promoted adult education and adult language learning as instruments of democratization, believing that whatever was learnt should enhance the learner’s capacity to contribute to the democratic process. In another Council of Europe report of the 1970s, Janne argued that adult education should be

> an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man ‘product of his society’, one moves to the idea of man ‘producer of his society’. (Janne 1977: 15)

This ideal should be reflected in the teaching/learning process itself: the aim of the Council of Europe’s policy in regard to adult language learning, for example, was to
make the process of language learning more democratic by providing the conceptual tools for the planning, construction and conduct of courses closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of the learner and enabling him so far as possible to steer and control his own progress. (Trim 1978: 1)

According to Version 1, learner autonomy is a matter of learner control and self-direction. In Holec’s definition autonomous learners manage for themselves dimensions of the language learning process that are traditionally managed by the teacher. The crucial distinction that Version 1 makes is between teacher-directed and self-directed learners. Holec acknowledges that the ability to manage one’s own learning is not necessarily inborn: it is the teacher’s job to support the transition from non-autonomous to autonomous learning by helping learners to develop their capacity for self-management. But in his view this is separate from language learning as such. He argues that the teacher has two objectives: to help the learner acquire (i) ‘the linguistic and communicative abilities he has defined for himself’ and (ii) ‘autonomy’ (Holec 1981: 23). (That the learner has defined his own objectives and yet must be led to autonomy seems curiously contradictory.)

Version 1 of learner autonomy has had a significant impact on language learning at university, mostly via self-access learning schemes. At the end of the 1970s most universities were equipped with language laboratories, though the behaviourist learning theory that had shaped their design was thoroughly discredited. The idea of self-access learning, according to which the individual student could study at times that suited her own convenience, perhaps using materials of her own choosing, gave the language laboratory a new lease of life. Libraries of audio and in due course video resources were accumulated: first tapes, then cassettes, and after that CDs and DVDs. By the end of the 1990s the analogue technology of language laboratories had been superseded by computer networks, learning resources were stored on servers, and the internet had opened up a vast array of new learning opportunities. Before this last development, working in a self-access centre usually meant working alone, which helps to explain the tendency in some parts of the world to treat ‘autonomy’ and ‘independence’ as synonyms. Some universities thought of language laboratories as a means of replacing human teachers; this reinforced the identification of ‘autonomy’ with ‘self-instruction’.

Universities quickly discovered that their students mostly lacked the skills to make effective use of self-access centres. They needed support of various kinds, usually delivered by an ‘adviser’ or ‘counsellor’ who provided ‘learner training’. At the same time self-access centres had the capacity to generate research data of many different kinds, qualitative as well as quantitative, and these have fed various strands of autonomy-related research. Those charged with advising learners found that it was useful to explore their beliefs and attitudes; the notion of learner training went hand in hand with an interest in learning strategies; the idea that the essential pedagogical challenge is to support the transition from non-autonomous to autonomous learning gave rise to the concept of ‘readiness for autonomy’; it also led to attempts to measure the extent of learners’ autonomy separately from their proficiency in the target language; and more recently the capacity of computers to track the use that is made of them has facilitated the exploration of learning behaviour in online language learning environments.
Version 2
My own work on learner autonomy (Version 2) took Version 1 as its starting point. In the early 1980s I was responsible for language laboratories in my university; exploiting them as a support for self-access learning seemed an obvious thing to do; and I believed in any case that university students should be brought to manage their own learning. However, when I first attempted to explore the concept of learner autonomy and identify possible theoretical underpinnings, I was influenced less by the success of our own experiments in self-access language learning than by the example of Leni Dam, who was teaching English in a Danish Folkeskole with pupils ranging in age from 6 to 16. Dam summarized her educational purpose thus:

By developing learner autonomy in the classroom I hope to strengthen my learners’ ‘ability to make [their] own decisions about what to do rather than being influenced by others or told what to do’ (Collins COBUILD Dictionary).

(Dam 1995, p.4)

Within the broad constraints imposed by the official curriculum, Dam’s learners were doing the things that characterize Holec’s autonomous learner: setting their own goals, choosing their own learning activities and materials, managing the learning process, and regularly evaluating learning outcomes. But they were doing these things interactively, as members of a learning community. In their case learner autonomy was an individual but also a group phenomenon: the progress of individual learners depended on and always fed back into the progress of the class. This brings us to the first of three major differences between learner autonomy Version 1 and learner autonomy Version 2: whereas Version 1 is individual-cognitive-organizational in its orientation, Version 2 is at once individual-cognitive-organizational and social-interactive-collaborative, and these two dimensions exist in a profoundly symbiotic relation to each other.

A major source for Version 2 was Douglas Barnes’s broadly constructivist psychology of learning, which assumed that all learning is a matter of accommodating new knowledge to what is already known: ‘To learn is to develop relationships between [what the learner knows already and the new system being presented to him], and this can only be done by the learner himself’ (Barnes 1976: 82; emphasis added). This implied that autonomy is a cognitive imperative and that pedagogy’s task is to help learners to recognize this and make a virtue out of necessity. The research on which Barnes based his book was concerned to find ways of counteracting the alienation of teenage learners; to draw them into engagement with school learning by exploiting the knowledge they brought with them to the classroom. Barnes explained this in terms of a distinction between ‘school knowledge’ and ‘action knowledge’, which he defined as ‘the knowledge on which our actions in the everyday world are based’ (ibid: 30). Too often school knowledge remains external to the learner, ‘the knowledge which someone else presents to us’:

We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher’s questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else’s knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes however we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated into that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say that it has become ‘action knowledge’. (Barnes 1976: 81)
Exploratory talk was the means by which Barnes proposed to bring school knowledge and learners’ action knowledge into fruitful interaction with each other.

Like learner autonomy Version 1, learner autonomy Version 2 wants learners to be actively engaged in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating their own learning; and like Version 1, Version 2 recognizes that ‘learning how to learn’ requires mediation and support from an expert (teacher, advisor, counsellor, etc.). However, for Version 2 all learning is autonomous in the sense that learners cannot help but construct their own knowledge. Pedagogical approaches that are shaped by this view want learners to manage their own learning in order to ensure that their action knowledge is fully engaged. They also want learners to manage their own learning because we are at our most motivated when we are autonomous or ‘volitional in our actions’ (for an overview of relevant research, see Deci 1996). According to Version 2, in other words, learner autonomy is important because autonomy helps to define the way human beings are. It is, for example, the goal but also the medium of developmental and experiential learning. Toddlers do not first learn a mother tongue and then, after several years of development, discover that they can use it to communicate with those around them. Rather, they learn their mother tongue as a result of their efforts to communicate, and those efforts are autonomous, prompted by the interests and goals they happen to be pursuing from one moment to the next. In adult life our capacity for autonomous behaviour is the basis on which we most effectively contribute to the various contexts in which we live – family, community, workplace, etc. This line of argument brings us to the second major difference between Version 1 and Version 2. Whereas Version 1 is concerned to bring learners from teacher-direction to self-direction, Version 2 believes that all learners already have some experience of what it is to be autonomous, and that it is education’s task to harness, make explicit and develop their inbuilt capacity for autonomy in order to secure optimal learning outcomes.

The third major difference between Version 1 and Version 2 has to do with language. According to Barnes, ‘[what pupils] learn can hardly be distinguished from the ability to communicate it’ (1976: 20). But besides being the medium in which knowledge is expressed, language is the tool with which we construct knowledge. Barnes set such store by exploratory talk because it is the means by which learners engage in discursive thinking and consciously take ownership of the knowledge they construct collaboratively: ‘The more a learner controls his own language strategies, and the more he is enabled to think aloud, the more he can take responsibility for formulating explanatory hypotheses and evaluating them’ (ibid.: 29). Barnes was concerned not with second and foreign language learning but with schooling in general. Thus when he refers to language and communication he has in mind learners’ first language. Version 2 of learner autonomy, however, applies his argument to second and foreign languages. It insists that language use plays a central role in successful language learning (a view that it shares with all mainstream theories of second language acquisition). But it believes that use of the target language as an instrument of learning must be spontaneous and authentic; in other words, it must arise from the learners’ own concerns, speak to their identities, and engage their agency. This means that the target language must be the preferred medium of classroom communication, including communication that is reflective, focused on metacognitive and metalinguistic issues. Swain (2006) argues that advanced language learning depends on three factors: ‘languaging’, agency and collaboration. She defines ‘languaging’ as ‘the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language’
(p.98), which is closely akin to Barnes’s ‘exploratory talk’. When it involves more than one person, ‘langaging’ requires collaboration. And within this framework the learner’s role is that of agent: ‘an individual who perceives, analyses, accepts or rejects solutions offered, makes decisions and so on (pp.100–101). This neatly captures the linguistic dimension of learner autonomy Version 2, for which agency in language learning and language use is inseparable from the learner’s proficiency in the target language. According to Version 2, however, ‘langaging’, agency and collaboration are fundamental to successful language learning at all levels of proficiency and education.

The essence of Version 2 may be summarized as follows. Because autonomy is a cognitive and motivational imperative, the crucial distinction is not between teacher-directed and self-directed learners, but between learners whose autonomy is focused on the business of language learning and learners whose autonomy is focused elsewhere. Language learner autonomy is constructed and enacted in classroom discourse that is authentically dialogic (Matusov 2007: 233): unremitting use of the target language ensures that language acquisition takes place; unremitting concern for learner involvement and learner reflection ensures that learners’ L2 repertoire is itself dialogically constituted, developing the internal metacognitive function in interaction with the external communicative function. Note that this is not a ‘method’ but a conceptual framework that allows us to devise contextually appropriate methods.

In classrooms that implement Version 2 the teacher plays a key role as expert – someone who knows about language and language learning; as guide – someone who can help a particular learning community to identify its learning needs; and as mediator/communicator – someone who can initiate, model and support the various forms of target language discourse required, including ‘langaging’. From the beginning learners are fully involved in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating their learning, as far as possible in the target language. Thus their autonomy is always constrained by (i) their developed L2 proficiency and (ii) their developed language learning skills. The ‘technology of literacy’ – writing things down – is indispensable to the reflective processes of planning, monitoring and evaluating. Learners use logbooks to capture the content and process of their learning, and posters serve the same purpose for the class as a whole. Writing also plays a central role in communication between learners: written prompts support speaking, while collaborative talk generates written texts. (For a more detailed version of this argument, see Little 2007.)

Implications of Version 2 for foreign language degree programmes
Traditionally, degree programmes in foreign languages have had three components: language, literature and linguistics; more recently other content has been added, for example history or some version of cultural studies. In the English-speaking world there was typically no connection between these different elements. Language classes were provided to develop students’ proficiency in the target language, but language teaching was considered drudgery and was often assigned to teaching assistants of one kind or another. Lectures on literature were generally given in English, which was also the language of seminars and tutorials. Although they were not supposed to do so, students sometimes read prescribed texts in English translation. Whether it was called philology or linguistics, study of the target language, its history and structural components, was likewise conducted in English. And English was the language in which students wrote term essays and (with the exception of the language papers) answers to exam questions. That was the kind of programme I followed as a student.
of German and French at Oxford in the 1960s (though I feel obliged to note that I always read German literature in German and French literature in French). Because none of the classes I attended required me to speak German or French, my oral proficiency in both languages was probably less secure when I graduated than when I left school. My teachers took the view that if I wanted to speak German or French I should go to Germany or France and get on with it, which in due course I did. I recently asked a student of modern languages at my Oxford college to describe her course of studies: as far as I could judge, nothing much has changed in half a century.

This does not make sense. A foreign language is not an academic discipline but rather the medium through which one can engage with an academic discipline. Logically, the purpose of studying an academic discipline through a foreign language is to become a member, whether temporary or permanent, of an academic community whose knowledge is constructed and communicated in that language. But in order to fulfil that purpose it is necessary to reach a relatively high level of proficiency in the language, and that is likely to be achieved only if the target language is the medium of all teaching and learning and the development of proficiency is fully integrated with the study of literature, linguistics, history, etc. According to learner autonomy Version 2, language learning arises from communicative and reflective language use in which the agency of the learner is fully engaged. That, surely, is what second and foreign language degree programmes should provide, but it can be delivered only if curricula are radically restructured. In a modular degree programme, for example, each module might comprise assigned readings, a weekly lecture, a weekly seminar in which the lecture and related readings are discussed and students summarize the results of their discussions in writing, and a second seminar in which the language of the lecture and the assigned readings is explored and appropriated in a variety of oral and written tasks. The seminars would be organized with a view to maximizing students’ involvement in exploratory talk, or ‘languaging’. In the course of a term or semester there should be plenty of scope for students to exercise individual and collaborative initiative. Given their experience of language learning at school, many freshman students are ill equipped for this kind of study, so it would be necessary to provide an induction programme in the first semester or two.

Reform of this kind faces a number of challenges, but two in particular may seem particularly forbidding. The first has to do with the sequencing of modules and the gradual adaptation of their structure and content to take account of students’ developing proficiency in the target language and their growing familiarity with the disciplines that determine course content. The second challenge is to mediate the curriculum to students in a way that explicitly engages their agency and supports the development of learner autonomy as understood in Version 2. In the second part of the paper I shall argue that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) can help us to meet the first of these challenges and the European Language Portfolio can help us to meet the second.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the European Language Portfolio, and foreign language degree programmes

Introducing the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) uses ‘can do’ statements to define L2 proficiency at six levels: A1 and
A2 (‘basic user’), B1 and B2 (‘independent user’), C1 and C2 (‘proficient user’). It provides illustrative scales for five communicative activities: LISTENING, READING, SPOKEN INTERACTION, SPOKEN PRODUCTION, and WRITING. These scales are summarized in the so-called self-assessment grid (Council of Europe 2001: 26–27), according to which a learner who has achieved level B1 in spoken interaction, for example, can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken, and can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events). The activity scales are supplemented by scales for various aspects of linguistic and strategic competence. In addition the CEFR provides a comprehensive taxonomic description of domains and varieties of language use.

The CEFR’s levels were quickly adopted as a way of specifying L2 learning objectives and outcomes. Without necessarily engaging in careful study of the CEFR itself, which is a complex and multidimensional document, language educators soon arrived at an informal consensus. A1 and A2 were the levels to be achieved by L2 learners at primary and lower secondary levels; B1 and B2 belonged to upper secondary; and C1 and C2 were the preserve of higher education. Analysis of the (mostly implied) communicative goals of the Irish L2 curricula for post-primary schools yielded A1 and A2 tasks for lower secondary (Junior Certificate) and B1 and B2 tasks for upper secondary (Leaving Certificate) – see the ‘I can’ checklists in the version of the European Language Portfolio designed for post-primary L2 learners in Ireland (Authentik 2001). In France a ministerial decree of 2005 stated that school leavers should achieve B2 in their first foreign language and B1 in their second foreign language. And the UK’s subject benchmark statement for primary degrees in languages (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2007: 15–16) specifies C1 for ‘threshold standard’ and C2 for ‘typical standard’. In other words, a student must achieve C1 in order to be awarded a degree, but most students achieve C2.

The question arises: does this consensus correspond to actual learning outcomes? Unfortunately the answer is no. Consider the following level descriptors (taken from the ‘I can’ checklists in the Swiss European Language Portfolio for older adolescent and adult learners, bmlv 2001):

A1:  I can introduce somebody and use basic greeting and leave-taking expressions
A2:  I can make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks
B1:  I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest
B2:  I can initiate, maintain and end discourse naturally with effective turn-taking
C1:  I can use the language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, professional or academic topics
C2:  I can take part effortlessly in all conversations and discussions with native speakers

Now consider the kind of language learning needed to reach each successive level. A1 and A2 descriptors mostly refer to discrete tasks and scenarios. Basic greeting and leave-taking expressions (A1) can be mastered in a few lessons; while simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks (A2) might provide the focus for several terms’ learning. But from B1 upwards descriptors refer to increasingly general and complex communicative activity: I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest (B1) requires an extended period of learning in which the target language is the medium of interaction in the classroom and/or elsewhere; and I can take part effortlessly in all conversations and dis-
cussions with native speakers (C2) is not a skill that can be imparted by a teacher in a traditional language classroom: it requires sustained use of the target language in a variety of academic and/or professional contexts, including university language departments. Students of modern languages whose course is delivered according to the time-hallowed traditions that shaped my own undergraduate experience have no hope of achieving C1, far less C2. To claim otherwise is to delude oneself and potentially to deceive others.

Using the CEFR to design modules for foreign language degree programmes
To the best of my knowledge, no university language department has yet redeveloped its curricula using the CEFR. To do so would require a complex recursive process involving at least five steps:

1. Having familiarized yourself with the CEFR and its multiple interacting dimensions, identify the minimum proficiency levels in LISTENING, READING, SPOKEN INTERACTION, SPOKEN PRODUCTION and WRITING that you expect your students to achieve by the end of their studies. Be realistic. The descriptors for C2 writing include: Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, complex reports, articles or essays which present a case, or give critical appreciation of proposals or literary works (Council of Europe 2001: 62). The full implication of this descriptor must be explored with reference to descriptors for linguistic competence/language quality. For example, according to the scale for GENERAL LINGUISTIC RANGE, a C2 learner-user can exploit a comprehensive and reliable mastery of a very wide range of language to formulate thoughts precisely, give emphasis, differentiate and eliminate ambiguity. No signs of having to restrict what he/she wants to say (ibid.: 110). These descriptors may apply to the exceptional student, but what about the average? B2 may be a more sensible level to aim for: Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options (ibid.: 62). The GENERAL LINGUISTIC RANGE descriptor for B2 reads as follows: Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints and develop arguments without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so (ibid.: 110). Bear in mind too that it is probably inappropriate to expect students to achieve the same proficiency level in all five activities. C1 may not be achievable by the average student in SPEAKING and WRITING, but may well be appropriate for READING.

2. Consider the entry level of the average student. Although the honors level Irish Leaving Certificate programme and examination includes tasks that can be linked to levels B1 and B2, the great majority of students do not achieve a fully developed B1 proficiency, let alone B2, especially in the productive skills. It may be prudent to assume no more than a comprehensively achieved A2 in SPEAKING and WRITING. Once realistic proficiency levels have been identified for entry and exit, it is possible to use descriptors for the intervening levels to plot the developmental trajectory that learners should follow. In doing this, remember to consult the language quality/linguistic competence and strategy descriptors (CEFR, Chapter 5) as well as the activities descriptors (Chapter 4).

3. Consider the content to be covered by the programme, express it in modules according to local convention, and decide at which points or in which content areas students will be able to choose from among two or more options. The chronological order in which the modules are arranged should be determined by the need to provide for (i) a coherent development in students’ content knowledge and (ii) a
gradually evolving mode of delivery that matches the growth of their target language proficiency and their study skills. Clearly, content should gradually become linguistically and conceptually more demanding as the programme unfolds.

(4) Use activities descriptors from the illustrative scales to identify the kind and level of tasks you want students to be able to perform at the end of each module; and use the competence descriptors to determine which aspects of the target language should be especially in focus. Once more, be realistic: recognize that it may be necessary to lower the sights set at the end of the first phase of the exercise.

(5) In interaction with (4), and with exploratory talk/languaging in mind, consider the kinds of discourse and learning task most likely to support students’ progress towards the desired learning outcomes.

At the end of this process it will be possible to supplement general credit level descriptors with language proficiency descriptors derived from the CEFR; and the rationale and aims, content, learning outcomes, and methods of teaching and learning can all be specified partly in terms of ‘can do’ descriptors.

According to the authors of the CEFR, most language learners ‘learn reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks’ (Council of Europe 2001: 141). As we have seen, however, the Council of Europe’s educational ethos favours learner autonomy, which requires that learners ‘learn proactively, taking initiatives to plan, structure and execute their own learning processes’ (ibid.). That is why the Council of Europe developed the European Language Portfolio, which has an obvious role in supporting the implementation of the kind of university foreign language curriculum I have just described.

The European Language Portfolio and its potential
The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has three obligatory components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. It is designed to make the language learning process more transparent to the learner, foster the development of learner autonomy, and promote intercultural awareness and plurilingualism. Effective use of the ELP depends on reflective processes in which self-assessment plays a central role. Goal setting and self-assessment are supported by checklists of ‘I can’ descriptors organized by activity and CEFR proficiency level (for an extended discussion of ELP-based self-assessment, see Little 2009).

Designing a version of the ELP to support implementation of a CEFR-informed foreign language curriculum at university is a relatively straightforward matter. The language passport is a fixed component: a standard version for use by adult learners is available on the Council of Europe’s ELP website (<http://www.coe.int/portfolio>). The dossier, on the other hand, has no fixed form, so it can either be left entirely open or given a structure that reflects the overall programme of study and the structure of modules. The language biography is the part of the ELP that is designed to move the learning process forward. That is where the checklists are to be found, alongside pages that invite general reflection on various aspects of L2 learning and L2 use. It has sometimes been suggested that each academic discipline needs its own checklist descriptors, but this notion rests on a misapprehension of the nature of descriptors at the higher proficiency levels. As we have seen, at levels A1 and A2 descriptors encapsulate simple tasks or routines, but from B1 upwards they refer to increasingly general language activity. They can certainly be used to set learning targets and self-assess learning outcomes, but not in the straight-
forward, box-ticking way that is often assumed. To develop the communicative capacity captured by higher-level descriptors takes time. This means that if self-assessment is to be a frequent practice the descriptors must be repeatedly deconstructed so that their implications are fully understood and interim learning targets can be derived from them. For this purpose the generic checklists available on the Council of Europe ELP website are entirely appropriate, though they will need to be translated into the students’ target language, for reasons that at this stage in my argument should need no further elaboration. They will also need to be interpreted with detailed reference to the demands of different curriculum areas – literary studies, linguistics, history, cultural studies, etc. Two examples will serve to illustrate what I mean:

- **B2 READING – I can quickly scan through long and complex texts on a variety of topics in my field to locate relevant details.**
  
  How quickly is ‘quickly’? What is ‘my field’? What is an appropriate ‘variety of topics’? In terms of field and topics, what counts as a ‘long and complex text’? What count as ‘relevant details’?

- **B2 WRITING – I can write clear detailed text on a wide range of subjects relating to my personal, academic or professional interests.**
  
  What are ‘my academic and/or professional interests’? What is an appropriate ‘range of subjects’? How do we define ‘clear detailed text’?

These questions can be used to focus exploratory talk, and the answers should make explicit the links between curriculum content and students’ developing proficiency in the target language.

Like a learning journal, the ELP captures the ongoing dialogue of language learning, which (in keeping with learner autonomy Version 2) is partly internal to the individual learner and partly a matter of collaboration between learners. The dialogue embraces planning, monitoring and evaluation, and reflection on linguistic form, language use, the intercultural dimension, and so on. In addition to their role in goal setting and self-assessment, the ‘I can’ checklists constitute a resource for talking about communication, language and language learning. When the ELP is central to the teaching and learning of languages, it gradually and cumulatively becomes the owner’s L2 autobiography, compiled in continuous dialogue with herself and the rest of the learning community. In this way it helps to overcome the inevitably ‘episodic’ and ‘fragmentary’ nature of L2 learning (Karlsson 2008).

**Conclusion**

The argument of this paper may be summarized as follows. The two versions of learner autonomy that I discussed in the first part are both intent on helping learners to manage their own learning. There are, however, three important differences between them. First, Version 1 is individual-cognitive-organizational in its orientation, whereas Version 2 is at once individual-cognitive-organizational and social-interactive-collaborative, and these two dimensions exist in a profoundly symbiotic relation to each other. Secondly, the crucial difference for Version 1 is between teacher-directed and self-directed learners, whereas for Version 2 it is between learners whose capacity for autonomy is focused on language learning and learners whose capacity for autonomy is focused elsewhere. And thirdly, Version 1 makes a distinction between learning a language and becoming an autonomous learner, whereas Version 2 insists that success in language learning depends on engaging the learner’s agency in appropriate use of the target language; in other words, Version 2 denies the possibility of detaching the development of learner autonomy from the development
of target language proficiency. Version 1 has had an impact on language learning at university via self-access programmes; Version 2, on the other hand, has had little impact. However, a traditional weakness of foreign language degree programmes, at least in the English-speaking world, is the lack of integration between their different elements, and Version 2 suggests a way of remedying this. It challenges us to teach such programmes entirely in the target language, to assign a central role to exploratory talk (or ‘languaging’), and to ensure that there is plenty of space for the exercise of individual and collaborative student initiative and self-management. This implies a central role for the reflective processes of goal setting and self-assessment.

The reform of foreign language curricula along these lines no doubt poses many challenges, but two in particular stand out. First, how are we to sequence modules and ensure that their structure and content accommodate students’ developing proficiency in the target language and their growing familiarity with the disciplines that determine course content? And second, how do we mediate the curriculum to students in a way that explicitly engages their agency and supports the development of learner autonomy Version 2? The CEFR helps us respond to the first of these challenges: its descriptive apparatus allows us to identify achievable language learning outcomes, reflect on our teaching procedures, and define the communicative and linguistic content of our modules. And the ELP helps us respond to the second challenge: we can use it to support the reflective processes that are central to the practice and development of learner autonomy and underlie the varieties of exploratory talk on which language learning in an academic context particularly depends.

The task of reform is not yet complete, however. The CEFR’s action-oriented approach is more thoroughly innovative than is often recognized, because it brings curriculum, teaching/learning and assessment into a closer relation to one another than has traditionally been the case. The same ‘can do’ descriptor can be used to define a curriculum goal, guide the selection of learning activities, and shape the development of assessment tasks and rating criteria. This fact should challenge us to rethink each of these dimensions of language education in terms of the other two; and such rethinking should lead us to design tests and exams based on the same criteria as learners use in their ELP-based self-assessment. We should develop rating grids and scoring schemes that can be used for formal assessment and for informal assessment, including peer assessment, that takes place during courses. We should take ELP-based self-assessment seriously, encouraging reliability by requiring students to produce evidence in support of their self-assessment. And we should find a way of incorporating self-assessment in the overall assessment scheme. By developing a new assessment culture of this kind we would close the circle, making our foreign language degree programmes fully learner-centred and autonomy-friendly, because learners would share in the evaluation of curriculum outcomes, including their own learning achievement. That should be the ultimate goal of any approach to language education, but also education in general, that aspires to realize the Council of Europe’s democratic ideal. Anyone who is interested in exploring this matter further should read a book not by an applied linguist but by an engineer: John Cowan’s *On becoming an innovative university teacher* (1998), which opens new windows on all the issues I have discussed in this paper.

**References**


