

# INDEPENDENCE

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## Reflections & Reviews

# Autonomy and motivation for language learning in the interconnected world

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*Introduction by Tin T. Dang:* The **Language Teaching and Learning Today Conference Series (LTLT)** is dedicated to autonomy and motivation for language learning in the interconnected world. LTLT focuses on crucial issues of teaching and learning English language for the sustainable development of the community in the 21st century. LTLT 2019 attracted over 340 academics and stakeholders from 11 countries and was highlighted with a keynote from Garold Murray on learner autonomy from a complexity perspective, using data drawn from studies in a social language learning space. A theoretical framework was then constructed for shaping research on EFL learner autonomy.

The conference continued with 39 research papers, workshops, and posters on a wide range of topics relevant to autonomy, motivation, attitudes, and practices in different learning modes from various local contexts, particularly of Vietnam, during April 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> 2019 in Ho Chi Minh City. EFL case studies from secondary school to postgraduate education level were reported. Autonomy development and motivational strategies employed in many online formal and social learning spaces were also reported. A trend of shifting teachers' roles from dictating the class operations to facilitating the class activities can be seen across several studies. Students are encouraged to develop their own learning strategies, monitor their learning

process, and interact with resources to better understand their own practices cognitively and behaviorally. Some specific reflections from the conference participants are given below:

**Garold Murray** leads off with his impressions: I was delighted to have been invited to speak at the *Language Teaching and Learning Today 2019 Conference* on learner autonomy. In my presentation, I examined what can be learned about learner autonomy by looking at it from the perspective of complex dynamic systems theory. In addition to presenting, I facilitated a pre-conference workshop in which teachers explored how they might support their students' out of class learning by promoting activities that make use of readily available online resources. For me, a highlight of the conference was this opportunity to work with local language teachers. Another highlight was being able to attend a range of impressive research presentations that demonstrated educators' commitment to the exploration and promotion of learner autonomy. As a first-time visitor to Vietnam, the conference also enabled me to experience Vietnamese hospitality, explore old Saigon and taste the coffee culture. I am looking forward to the next conference and would urge educators in Asia and beyond to consider participating.



**Le Ha To Quyen** reports on the presentation by **Tran Thi Ngoc Linh**, *Learner Autonomy as Social Constructivism: Potentials and Challenges*. This was an interesting presentation where the presenter and the audience could exchange ideas to reach the best solutions for learner autonomy scaffolding. In a confident and enthusiastic manner, Linh presented her research about how language learners used their mobile learning tools for their learning autonomy development in both formal and informal learning settings. Even though the topic was quite broad and it could require a longer period of time to see the development of learner autonomy, the results from the research were really promising. Students reported positive attitudes about the forum created by the teacher/researcher and they were engaged to interact and collaborate with their peers much more in class as well as outside the classrooms on their mobile devices. The recommendations also indicated that teachers need to be careful not to overwhelm students with providing guidance. On a whole, I can see it is clear that teachers do not need to start with something very big or very difficult, but listen to students' specific needs and work on those.

With her interest in fostering learner autonomy in out-of-class contexts, Quyen also participated in the presentation by **Michael Carroll**, *Identity Construction and Autonomy in Online Spaces*. Starting with the position that language use and language learning are social practices and Norton-Pierce's (2000) notion of the imagined identity of the language learner, Carroll discussed how he interpreted the experiences of students in terms of the construction and reconstruction of identities as they use computers and online resources such as *DynEd*, *English Central*, *U-Cat*, *ALC Net Academy*, *Ello*, *Real English*, *Lingorank*, *Lyricstraining*, *BBC Learning* in English language classrooms. From their stories, students illustrated the changes that were taking place within them and stated they trying out new selves or forming an imagined identity. The evidence for this stage showed in the students' ability to know which resources would be most suitable for them, and to analyze and evaluate materials and activities they worked with. Identity is a very fluid construct, but it has a close relationship with agency and learner autonomy, so I am grateful that Carroll shared this research focus.

**Jonathan J. Felix** reports on a featured presentation by **Hafizoah Kassim**. One of the most memorable aspects of LTLT 2019 for me was the plenary session through which Dr Kassim presented on the topic of *Strategising Learning Experience(s) Through E-learning Platforms to Enhance Creative Potential and Language Performance*. The title of this presentation only captured in part the fundamental line of reasoning in this address, namely the untapped potential of educational technology in developing students' creativity abilities as it related to language learning. The dominant idea of learning experiences versus learning strategies or teaching approaches were also contrasted. What stood out to me in this presentation was Dr Kassim's focus on Industry 4.0 skills, also known as 21st-century skills or

as 4IR competencies. Furthermore, the information and ideas conveyed had a wide range of application beyond language learning, related to several other disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and the humanities. She argued that it was important to cultivate the relationship between creativity and learner autonomy in language learning using technology. For me, this proposition advanced by Dr Kassim was fascinating, given that the popular discourse on technology in education is generally centred on its use as a technique in process-based teaching approaches, rather than used for fostering creative outputs and transferrable abilities among students. Dr Kassim's thought-provoking presentation enabled me to reflect on my teaching practice as a transdisciplinary academic and to consider ways in which to refine my efforts toward developing 4IR competencies in my students.

**Jonathan** continues: *Autonomy and Attitude of University Freshmen as the View of Self-Determination Theory in Vietnam* by **Le Ngoc Quynh Nhu**, Ton Duc Thang University, investigated the underexplored area of learner motivation and autonomy within the Vietnamese context. Delivered in a clear, comprehensive and enthusiastic fashion, the research was presented in a manner which conveyed a sense of critical urgency and optimism in terms of better understanding the psychology of Vietnamese students, and how this is affected by their socio-cultural positioning as Confucian heritage subjects. The use of self determination theory in this study was particularly interesting. This theory was examined as the dominant factor which influenced positive student attitudes and corresponding behaviours. The element of gender and how this contributed to how students responded within and outside the classroom environment was also considered. Framed as a preliminary study, the context-specific focus of this presentation served the purpose of providing opportunities for further study by educational psychologists and other experts within the social sciences, while at the same time building on the growing body of research related to higher education teaching and learning in Vietnam itself. This presentation was one of many others which left an impression on me by directing my thinking towards the relationship between relatedness, competence, and autonomy in my work with Vietnamese students within the local higher education environment.

**Hafizoah Kassim** reports on a presentation by **Le Thi Thuy Nhung, Nguyen Le Tram Anh & Ong Van Nam** entitled *Use of mobile devices for English learning purposes among university English majors*. This presentation looked at the utilization of mobile devices in improving students' English language proficiency. Data were collected among English major students investigating the capability of mobile devices in motivating and empowering students to improve their language skills. The speakers reported both the advantages and disadvantages of using mobile devices during the learning process as well as generally, including health deterioration due to excessive use. As a learning tool, the students agreed to a certain extent

that mobile devices were capable of motivating them in regulating their own learning, but this needs to be further investigated. It is interesting for me to see how learning is motivated by the social use of technology, and motivation is obviously the main source for learner autonomy development.

Interested in the theme of technology, **Hafizoah Kassim** also participated in *Learner autonomy in improving English through online learning: Perspectives from learners and teachers* by **Pham Thi My Duyen**. The speaker illustrated the development of technology in language education and narrowed it down to the trends of using online learning platforms in language teaching and learning. She also discussed the innovative and systematic characteristics of online learning platforms in providing students with the opportunities to regulate their learning. Data were collected from non-English major students as well as teachers. An online learning platform is a digital platform which students and teachers can benefit from not only to improve their language skills but also general skills. Although the employment of a learning management system (LMS) is nothing new in the contemporary digital world, I find the way that the LMS has been used to regulate students' learning process interesting. The online learning platform is well integrated with the classroom activities to maintain students' control of their learning.

**Conclusion by Tin T. Dang:** In short, the conference demonstrated a clear concentration on nurturing the learning-to-learn ability which has recently been articulated in the Vietnam Education Reform Agenda. It should be noted that Vietnamese learners had been traditionally required to listen attentively to teachers in class and exercises individually without questioning anything during their learning process. The effectiveness of this methodology changed dramatically after several critical reviews on Vietnamese students' failure to communicate in English at a basic level after several years of learning English in school and even university. Directives for developing EFL learners' abilities to learn have also urged changes in the education philosophy as a whole. Constructivist theory is now starting to be implemented across the education sector although opposition can still be easily found. Students are also reported to resist taking control of their own learning. Therefore, during this transition period, further research on learning capacity in the local and cultural contexts must be conducted to better profile Vietnamese learners in order to contribute to effective implementation of the education reforms.

#### References:

Norton-Peirce, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. London: Pearson Education.

