



Reflections

The LA SIG one-day conference at the University of Duisburg- Essen, Germany 26th November 2010 *Involving Language Learners: Success Stories and Constraints*

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I first came across Learner Autonomy Special Interested Group (LASIG) a couple of years ago, when I started my PhD research studies focused on autonomy and plurilingualism. Attending last year's 44th IATEFL Annual Conference in Harrogate, I met part of the LA group. On that occasion, I could immediately realize the great involvement of all the members and I was impressed with their contagious energy and extraordinary kindness. There, I was also introduced to some of the 'big names' in the field of LA, starting from Leni Dam, Lienhard Legenhausen, Richard Smith, and others, and I had the pleasure to meet Katja Heim and Christian Ludwig, the organizers of the LASIG one-day conference which would be held at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, just some months after. Still immersed in that enthusiasm, I decided that I would go.

November 26th arrived. Not only did the conference title *Involving language learners: Success stories and constraints* perfectly express the contents of keynote presentations, workshops and posters in the programme, but it was also a *leitmotiv* recurring in the personal experience of all the people present that day, from the organizers to the coordinator, from those who have been involved in learner autonomy for a while to those who were new to the field. As I see it, '*involvement*' in the topic of language learner autonomy always leads to *success* because it presupposes interest in student-centered methodology, implies reflection on one's way of teaching and intended pedagogical practice, and challenges us to widen our perspectives. In other words, involvement leads to action. This is exactly what is happening to me, and this is probably what Katja and Christian must have felt when they asked Leni

Dam, the LASIG coordinator, about the possibility of having a conference on autonomy at their university in Essen.

The aim of the event was to raise awareness among language teachers and researchers of issues related to autonomy in language learning and share stories, knowledge and beliefs in order to rethink the frameworks appropriate for fostering autonomy. The programme opened with a talk given by Leni Dam, who described her success story in language learning autonomy, begun in 1972. Before that time, she had been teaching EFL in traditional classes, where weak pupils were divided from stronger ones. Convinced of the potential richness that peer teaching might have offered to her students, she decided to experiment with a new approach to be developed in mixed-ability classes. Therefore, she tried to give her students more and more responsibility for, and control over, their learning processes, with the purpose of enhancing their self-esteem and motivation in language learning. The precious value of Leni's account is to be found in the narration itself: a story of a teacher who tried hard to help her students improving in their EFL learning and in their personal growth as well. Was hers a success story? We could say "the rest is...history", as everyone interested in language learner autonomy knows that Leni Dam is now one of the most important and best-known experts and teacher trainers in the field.

The morning keynote was given by Lienhard Liegenhausen, who introduced some theoretical and procedural principles to be taken into account when developing learner autonomy. First of all, Lienhard insisted on the fact that using FL in authentic situations gives the students chances to construct their language system while expressing themselves meaningfully. Given this, success in autonomous language learning occurs if learners have developed their personality, acquired social competences, and learnt how to learn and to communicate. Evidence of successful practices derives from a longitudinal research project, LAAL (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment), in which traditional and autonomous classes were monitored in order to compare their linguistic achievement. What had happened when I first read a couple of articles informing on the results of this project (Legenhausen 2003, 2008) occurred this time again: I was impressed by the encouraging outcomes and by the naturalness and spontaneity characterizing pupils' interactions in autonomous classes. This was another success story.

It was mid-morning and my *'involvement'* in language learner autonomy was in progress...

The following session, five parallel workshops, gave the audience the chance to hear both qualified language teachers and researchers relating their experiences with learner autonomy connected to psychological aspects, self-assessment, teacher autonomy, coursebooks and technologies. Besides the considerable food for thought offered by those presentations, what I appreciated was also the way the workshops were run, that is, really providing the audience with an appropriate time to compare ideas, take part in the discussions, express views and make new contacts.

The afternoon programme was divided into three parts: a keynote given by Markus Ritter, other parallel workshops and a final session involving discussion and concluding remarks. Markus Ritter's presentation, focused on teacher autonomy from the perspective of teacher education, was an effective and reasoned alternation between considerations originating from his own reflections on this subject and introspective questions. It is not a coincidence that his presentation started with the question "How autonomous have I been in the last few weeks?" and ended asking "What are your personal plans for becoming more autonomous in the next few weeks?"

Thus, still thinking about *my* personal plans for developing my future autonomy (my *'involvement'* was proceeding at a gallop!), I moved to the workshop regarding LA and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). I have been dealing with CLIL methodology for seven years, both as a researcher and teacher trainer, so I was quite curious to deepen the promising connection between CLIL and LA, the two fields of interest of my academic studies. Dieter Wolff, expert in CLIL, listed three main arguments in favour of considering content and language integrated learning as an excellent environment to achieve the principles of LA: first of all, both CLIL and LA require self-organization since they ask the learner to see things anew and to integrate knowledge deriving from different settings; secondly, both CLIL and LA work with authentic materials and authentic content in order to create a rich learning environment and give learners the opportunity to relate their own former knowledge; finally, CLIL classrooms allow authentic interaction, just the kind of communication LA pursues. The other two contributions included in this session, Michael Rogge's and Lisa Rauschelbach's, confirmed that more and more attention is being given to the relationship between CLIL and LA among

scholars in the field of language learning: they showed some research data on project portfolios and self-evaluation material used in CLIL environments (Michael cited the project called *CertiLingua label of excellence for plurilingual, European and International competences*) and findings from case studies on learning strategies used by multilingual learners in CLIL programmes (Lisa reported on the DESI [*Deutsch-Englisch-Schülerleistungen-International* = German English Student Assessment International] study).

At the end of the day, participants gathered for the final session. The audience was all there, satisfied with the work done until that moment and full of new ideas, intentions, plans, curiosities and questions, lots of questions. The key speakers were asked to give their advice on those aspects that have always been considered the most problematic of all time: the need to enhance pupils' self-esteem in order to develop their LA, the importance of a careful and organized passage between primary and secondary school, and the need to find ways to integrate LA in a school curriculum. Leni and the other experts concluded the discussion agreeing that the first step in 'spreading' LA is to practise it at university level because if students are taught following the principles of language learner autonomy, they will foster the development of autonomous learning when they themselves become teachers.

By then, everyone's *'involvement'* was palpable. My *'involvement'* in LA was maturing so fast that in the evening, while having dinner, I asked Leni about the possibility of organizing a LASIG one-day conference in Venice (Italy) where I work, in the future, maybe within 2011. I am strongly convinced that *involving* language learners depends on us, that success stories are a consequence of our beliefs, of our will to "spread" LA, and I really hope that mine will be a *success story*, too!

References

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