Section

What is autonomy?

This section will:

• outline the history of autonomy in language learning and identify its sources in the fields of language pedagogy, educational reform, adult education, the psychology of learning and political philosophy;

• discuss definitions of autonomy and key issues in research;

• explain why autonomy is a key issue in language education today.
Chapter 1

The history of autonomy in language learning

1.1 Origins of the concept

Second language acquisition predates institutionalised language learning by many centuries. Even in the modern world millions of individuals continue to learn languages without the aid of formal instruction. Although there is much that we can learn from their efforts, the theory of autonomy in language learning has been essentially concerned with the organisation of formal education. As such, it has a history of approximately four decades.

Concept 1.1 The origins of autonomy in language learning

The concept of autonomy first entered the field of language teaching through the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project, established in 1971. One of the outcomes of this project was the establishment of the Centre de Recherches et d’Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, France, which rapidly became a focal point for research and practice in the field. Yves Châlon, the founder of CRAPEL, is considered by many to be the father of autonomy in language learning. Châlon died at an early age in 1972 and the leadership of CRAPEL was passed to Henri Holec, who remains a prominent figure within the field of autonomy today. A seminar on self-directed learning and autonomy at the University of Cambridge in December 1976, which included contributions from Philip Riley and Caroline Stanchina of CRAPEL, was also an important foundational event in the field (Harding-Esch, 1977). Holec’s (1981) project report to the Council of Europe is a key early document on autonomy in language learning. The journal Mélanges Pédagogiques, published at CRAPEL, has also played an important role in the dissemination of research on autonomy from 1970 to the present day. Important early papers on autonomy from Mélanges Pédagogiques were distributed internationally in Riley’s (1985) collection on Discourse and learning.
According to Gremmo and Riley (1995), interest in the concept of autonomy within the field of language education was in part a response to ideals and expectations aroused by the political turmoil in Europe in the late 1960s. Holec (1981: 1) began his report to the Council of Europe (Concept 1.1) with a description of the social and ideological context within which ideas of autonomy in learning emerged:

The end of the 1960s saw the development in all so-called industrially advanced Western countries of a socio-political tendency characterized by a definition of social progress, no longer in terms of increasing material well-being through an increase in consumer goods and services, but in terms of an improvement in the ‘quality of life’ – an expression that did not become a slogan until some years later – based on the development of a respect for the individual in society.

The Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Project aimed to provide adults with opportunities for lifelong learning and the approach developed at CRAPEL was influenced by proposals from the emerging field of adult self-directed learning (Chapter 2.2), which insisted ‘on the need to develop the individual’s freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives’. This connection between education, individual freedom and social responsibility also reflected prevailing views of personal autonomy in European and North American political philosophy at the time.

Autonomy, or the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning, was seen as a natural product of the practice of self-directed learning, or learning in which the objectives, progress and evaluation of learning are determined by the learners themselves. Among the key innovations in the CRAPEL approach to the provision of opportunities and support for self-directed language learning were the self-access resource centre and the idea of learner training. In its early days, the theory and practice of autonomy in language learning also enjoyed an uneasy association with ideas of ‘individualisation’ in language instruction.

### 1.2 Autonomy and self-access

The first self-access language learning centres, at CRAPEL (Riley and Zoppis, 1985) and the University of Cambridge (Harding-Esch, 1982), were based on the idea that access to a rich collection of second language materials would offer learners the best opportunity for experimentation with self-directed learning (Quote 1.1). The provision of counselling services and an emphasis on authentic materials were also important elements in the CRAPEL approach.
At CRAPEL, self-access was seen as a means of facilitating self-directed learning. In recent years, however, self-access language learning centres have proliferated to the point where ‘self-access language learning’ is often treated as a synonym for self-directed or autonomous learning. In many institutions, self-access centres have been established without any strong pedagogical rationale and it is often assumed, without any strong justification, for the assumption that self-access work will automatically lead to autonomy. To a lesser extent, the producers of self-instructional and distance learning materials have assumed that autonomy will be one outcome of these modes of learning. One of the important lessons of the spread of self-access over the past three decades, however, is that there is no necessary relationship between self-instruction and the development of autonomy and that, under certain conditions, self-instructional modes of learning may even inhibit autonomy (Chapter 8).

Because self-access centres have been enthusiastic consumers of educational technologies, self-access learning has also tended to become synonymous with technology-based learning. Within the field of computer-assisted language learning, especially, autonomy has become an important issue. As in the case of self-access, however, researchers on autonomy emphasise that learners who engage in technology-based learning do not necessarily become more autonomous as a result of their efforts. A great deal depends on the nature of the technology and the use that is made of it (Chapter 9).

### 1.3 Autonomy and learner training

Like self-access, learner training began life as a mechanism to support self-directed learning (Dickinson and Carver, 1980; Holec, 1980). At CRAPEL, it was argued that in order to carry out effective self-directed learning, adult
learners would need to develop skills related to self-management, self-monitoring and self-assessment. Learners who were accustomed to teacher-centred education would also need to be psychologically prepared for more learner-centred modes of learning. According to Holec, teaching learners how to carry out self-directed learning would be counterproductive, since the learning would by definition no longer be self-directed. Instead, learners needed to train themselves (Quote 1.2). Although learners might draw on the support of counsellors, teachers or other learners, the important thing about learner training was that it should be based on the practice of self-directed learning itself. Self-direction was understood as the key to learning languages and to learning how to learn languages.

**Quote 1.2** Holec on learner training

The basic methodology for learner training should be that of *discovery*; the learner should discover, with or without the help of other learners or teachers, the knowledge and the techniques which he needs as he tries to find the answers to the problems with which he is faced. By proceeding largely by trial and error he trains himself progressively.

Holec (1980: 42)

As the practice of learner training became more widespread in the 1980s and 1990s it increasingly drew upon insights from research on learning strategies, which aimed to identify the behaviours and strategies used by successful learners and train less successful learners in their use. Although the idea of autonomy did not initially have a strong influence on learner strategies research, Wenden (1991) made the link explicit in the title of her book, *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*. Like self-access, learner training has also taken on a life of its own in recent years. While most practitioners in the field see learner training as leading to greater autonomy, learner training is no longer confined to self-directed learning. Dickinson (1992), for example, views learner training as a resource to help learners to engage more actively in classroom learning, and some of the best learner training materials have been developed for classroom use (Chapter 10).

### 1.4 Autonomy and individualisation

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, autonomy was closely associated with individualisation, an association evident in the titles of collections that linked the two fields (Altman and James, 1980; Brookes and Grundy, 1988; Geddes and Sturtridge, 1982). Brookes and Grundy (1988: 1), for example,
suggested in the introduction to their collection of papers on individualisation and autonomy that the two were linked to each other through the idea of learner-centredness:

One corollary of learner-centredness is that individualisation will assume greater importance, as will the recognition of the autonomy of the learner as the ultimate goal.

Individualisation and autonomy overlapped in as much as both were concerned with meeting the needs of individual learners. Self-directed learning as it was practised at CRAPEL was thus in a sense a form of individualisation, in which learners determined their own needs and acted upon them. As the practice of self-access spread, self-access resource centres were also seen as performing important functions in the individualisation of learning.

Individualisation also took the form of programmed learning – a mode of instruction in which learners were expected to work their way, at their own pace, through materials prepared by teachers. From the outset, researchers at CRAPEL took pains to distinguish self-directed learning from programmed individualised learning on the grounds that the latter left the most important decisions in learning to the teacher rather than to the learner. Holec (1981: 6) also made a distinction between teaching that takes the learner into consideration and learning that is directed by the learners themselves:

In a general way the extent to which the learner is taken into consideration forms no criterion for judging the extent to which learning is self-directed: individualization effected by taking into account the learner’s needs, his favourite methods of learning, his level, and so on, leave the learner in the traditional position of dependency and do not allow him to control his learning for himself.

Riley (1986) also argued that programmed learning deprived learners of the freedom of choice essential to the development of autonomy (Quote 1.3).

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**Quote 1.3 Riley on autonomy and individualisation**

Individualisation (‘individualised learning’, ‘individualised instruction’) is, historically at least, linked with programmed learning and based on a thoroughly behaviouristic psychology. As it is generally practised, it leaves very little freedom of choice to the individual learner. Rather it is the teacher who tries to adapt his methodology and materials to the learner, like a doctor writing out a prescription. That is, the majority of the relevant decisions are made for the learner, not by him. It is in fact individualised teaching: it aims at the most efficient use of the teacher and at the most effective result, but in terms of what the teacher wants the learner to achieve.

Riley (1986: 32)
The early association of autonomy with individualisation may also be largely responsible for the widespread criticism that autonomy implies learners studying languages in isolation from teachers and from each other. This criticism was more difficult to counter since it must be acknowledged that, although collaborative programmes for self-directed groups of learners have been designed at CRAPEL and elsewhere, much of the early work in the field of autonomy focused on the learner as an individual with distinct characteristics and needs. In recent years, however, researchers on autonomy have emphasised that the development of autonomy necessarily implies collaboration and interdependence.

1.5 Autonomy and interdependence

It is evident in retrospect that the concept of autonomy in language learning had, by the late 1980s, begun to suffer something of a crisis of identity. Holec (1985a) continued to emphasise that autonomy should be used to describe a capacity of the learner, but others began to use it to refer to situations in which learners worked under their own direction outside the conventional language-teaching classroom. Riley and Zoppis (1985: 287), for example, described learners working in a self-access centre as working in ‘semi-autonomy’ or ‘complete autonomy’. Dickinson (1987: 11) defined autonomy as ‘the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions’. He also used the term ‘full autonomy’ to describe the situation in which the learner is entirely independent of teachers, institutions or specially prepared materials. Although there is now consensus within the field that autonomy best refers to the capacity to control or take charge of one’s learning, the term ‘autonomous learning’ is still used to refer to the situation of studying without the direct presence of a teacher, especially in the literature on learning beyond the classroom.

Researchers on autonomy were aware that in order to develop a capacity to take control of their learning, learners needed to be freed from the direction and control of others. At the same time, they were well aware that learners who chose, or were forced by circumstances, to study languages in isolation from teachers and other learners, would not necessarily develop this capacity. However, the argument that the opportunity to exercise autonomy through self-directed learning was a necessary precondition for the development of autonomy was interpreted by critics as an argument that it was a sufficient condition. Moreover, the theory and practice of autonomy had, in a sense, become framed within the practice of individualised self-directed learning, and was seen by many as being irrelevant to classroom learning. The use of the term independence as a
synonym for autonomy by some researchers also led critics to view the field of autonomy as one in which crucial questions concerning the social character of learning are avoided (Concept 1.2).

Concept 1.2  **Independence, dependence and interdependence**

A number of researchers, in the United Kingdom and Australia especially, have preferred the term independence to autonomy, creating two terms for what is essentially the same concept. When *independence* is used as a synonym of autonomy, its opposite is *dependence*, which implies excessive reliance on the direction of teachers or teaching materials. One problem with the use of this term, however, is that it can also be understood as the opposite of *interdependence*, which implies working together with teachers and other learners towards shared goals. Many researchers would argue that autonomy does imply interdependence. For this reason, the term independence is avoided in this book.

The theory and practice of autonomy escaped from this crisis of identity largely through the efforts of practitioners who experimented with the idea of autonomy in classroom settings (Chapter 11). Their work was influenced in part by developing views of the classroom as a ‘social context’ for learning and communication (Breen, 1986; Breen and Candlin, 1980) and the idea that autonomy could be developed by a shift in relationships of power and control within the classroom. Some of the most influential work in this area was carried out by Leni Dam and her colleagues in Danish secondary schools, where autonomy developed through negotiation of curriculum and classroom tasks (Dam, 1995). This work, which developed out of a collaborative in-service teacher education project with the University of Lancaster (Breen et al., 1989), had a considerable influence on later innovations, prompting a shift in the focus of research towards classroom practice and teachers’ own autonomy.

One of the most challenging developments in the theory of autonomy in the 1990s was the idea that autonomy implies interdependence. Kohonen (1992: 19) argued the point forcefully:

> Personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one’s own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways.

Collaborative decision making within cooperative learning groups was thus a key feature of Kohonen’s ‘experiential’ model for the development of autonomy. Little (1996: 211) also argued that collaboration is essential
to the development of autonomy as a psychological capacity, stating that ‘the development of a capacity for reflection and analysis, central to the development of learner autonomy, depends on the development and internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions’. Such statements provided a corrective to the earlier emphasis on the individual working outside the classroom. They also provided a focus for research and practice on the reform of the conventional classroom to support the development of autonomy (see also Breen, 2001; Kohonen et al., 2000).

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**Quote 1.4** Little on teacher autonomy

‘...since learning arises from interaction and interaction is characterized by interdependence, the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers.’

Little (1995: 175)

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The idea of interdependence in the classroom was also developed through work on teacher autonomy (see Chapter 13). In this work, the interdependence at issue is between learners and teachers and some have gone so far as to suggest that the development of learner autonomy is dependent on teacher autonomy (Quote 1.4). Although a strong case can be made for this argument in classroom contexts, the implication that the development of learner autonomy presupposes classroom learning remains problematic. There is also the difficulty of separating learner–teacher interdependence from learner dependence upon teachers. Nevertheless, current interest in the idea of teacher autonomy reflects the degree to which learner autonomy is now viewed as a socially and institutionally contextualised construct.

In place of a simplistic dichotomy between autonomous learning and instructed learning, we now have a more complex view of autonomy as the outcome of a range of education processes. This view involves greater attention to classroom learning and teacher education. At the same time, there has been continued attention to out-of-class and out-of-school settings, especially self-access, distance learning and technology-based learning (Chapters 8 and 9). Within a broadly social understanding of learner autonomy, there has also been renewed interest in learner individuality in qualitative investigations of the long-term development of autonomy in individual language learning careers (Benson and Nunan, 2002, 2005; Kalaja, Barcelos and Menezes, 2008).
Why autonomy? Why now?

In the course of its evolution, the concept of autonomy has become part of the mainstream of research and practice within the field of language education. This is in part due to the reported success of numerous projects associated with autonomy and the efforts of those who have advocated autonomy as a goal of education. However, it would be a mistake to assume that autonomy has entered the mainstream of language education independently of social and economic factors that have made language educators and funding authorities more open to the practices associated with it (Concept 1.3).

Concept 1.3  Autonomy in policy and practice

As part of its collaborative work on autonomy in language learning, the EuroPAL project has published data on autonomy in the education and language education policies of seven European countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, England, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden (Miliander and Trebbi, 2008). Policies in all seven countries were supportive of autonomy, with Norway having the mostly strongly articulated policies on paper. An extract from the Norwegian National Common Core Curriculum for primary and secondary schools reads:

Education shall provide learners with the capability to take charge of themselves and their lives, as well as with the vigour and will to stand by others. [Education] must teach the young to look ahead and train their ability to make sound choices, allow each individual to learn by observing the practical consequences of his or her choices, and foster means and manners, which facilitate the achievement of the results they aim at. The young must gradually shoulder more responsibility for the planning and achievement of their own education – and they must take responsibility for their own conduct and behaviour. (Cited in Trebbi, 2008b: 42)

An extract from the French as a second foreign language curriculum for lower secondary reads:

The learning task will enable pupils to discover and explore the language, to use it right from the start, and through their own use of it gradually systematize their discoveries and try out their knowledge of the language. The pupils' evaluation of their own texts, and of the actual work process, helps them gain insight into their own language learning. (Cited in Trebbi, 2008b: 45)

But Trebbi, who has been involved in projects on autonomy in northern Europe since the 1980s, also cites extracts from a Council of Europe Experts’ Report on language education policy in Norway, which indicate that progress towards learner autonomy has been limited, with many teachers adhering to traditional ways of teaching languages. She suggests that this is partly due to...
The more complex view of autonomy that now characterises the field reflects the range of contexts in which it is now discussed and applied. This in turn reflects the development of a much wider interest in the idea of autonomy in language education. The number of publications on autonomy in language learning appearing since the turn of the century is an indicator of the growth of autonomy as a specialised field of inquiry. The inclusion of sections on autonomy in more general guides to language teaching, on the other hand, is a sign of a somewhat more diffuse interest in autonomy within the field (Cameron, 2001; Harmer, 2001; Hedge, 2000). In these works learner autonomy is presented less as a specialised educational concept, and more as an idea that is likely to form part of language teachers’ conceptual toolkit. Research on autonomy in the field of language education has no doubt contributed to language teachers’ knowledge of the concept and its applications, but Cameron’s account of the relevance of autonomy to young learners (Quote 1.5) points to a broader sense of autonomy as a ‘good thing’ that comes from outside this field. Cameron also touches upon a widespread feeling that, in spite of being a ‘good thing’, autonomy may also be imposed on language learners by the realities of a changing world. Teachers may also feel that they are often presented with the problem of making autonomy work in settings to which it is not always transparently relevant.

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**Quote 1.5** Lynne Cameron on autonomy and young learners

It is commonly recognised in today’s world that autonomous and self-regulated learners will be at an advantage in continuing to learn and adjust throughout their lives as technology and information develop rapidly and continuously. Learner autonomy then is ‘a good thing’ and to be encouraged, but how realistic is this in classes of five year olds? My own view is that we tend to...
Much of this book is concerned with evidence that autonomy can be made to work in a variety of settings. In this section, however, I want to look briefly at five aspects of the broader contexts of educational and social change that have both favoured the spread of interest in autonomy and problematised its role in the theory and practice of language teaching and learning: the changing landscape of language teaching and learning, the globalisation of educational policy, changing assumptions about the nature of work and competence, the rise of self-improvement culture, and changing conceptions of social and personal identity.

Allwright (1988: 35) summed up the view of many in the late 1980s, when he wrote that autonomy was ‘associated with a radical restructuring of pedagogy, a restructuring that involves the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working’. In retrospect, however, we can see that, for reasons having relatively little to do with those who were advocating autonomy, the restructuring of language pedagogy around innovations such as self-access, distance learning, information technology and blended learning were already underway in the late 1980s and have only gathered pace since. The impetus behind these processes has come both from the exponential growth since the early 1960s in the number of language learners, especially English language learners, worldwide and a global trend towards the reduction of per capita costs of language education. It is not only economies of scale that have made innovations associated with autonomy attractive to governments and institutions, however, but also the diversity that has accompanied growth in student numbers. As education providers find it increasingly difficult to predict the needs of the heterogeneous populations of students under their charge, it makes good sense to offer students choices and a degree of independence. Where more traditional approaches prevail, as they do in many primary and secondary school systems around the world, there is often an underlying, if questionable, assumption of a homogeneous student body and a common purpose for language learning. Recent reviews of language education policy in East Asia, however, also show how increased English language provision in schools has been accompanied by a shift towards communicative and task-based approaches to classroom learning and the use of self-access and CALL facilities (Ho, 2004; Nunan, 2003).
In these respects, language teaching is possibly a step ahead of other subject areas, but in recent years broader education policies have also begun to favour experiments in autonomy in certain respects. The well-documented tendency towards the globalisation of educational policy, leading to increasingly homogeneous national policies, has been an important factor in this (Block and Cameron, 2002; Mundy, 2005; Wiseman and Baker, 2005). Within the framework of globalised policy, the development of the individual has become a central concern. According to Mundy (2005: 8), educational convergence in the late twentieth century ‘helped produce a world culture that embedded such common ideas and institutions as citizenship, equality, individualism and progress in territorially defined nation–states’.

Wiseman and Baker (2005: 8) note how this has largely been a process of exporting Western assumptions to other parts of the world. Driven by the economic principle that the education of individuals can influence national economic growth and has contributed significantly to the economic development of nations, the Western ‘myth of the individual’ as the source of value and change has come to provide the model framework for schooling around the world. The extent to which principles of learner autonomy have been built into language education policy has been less well-documented, although data has now been published on seven European countries (Miliander and Trebbi, 2008) (Concept 1.3) and policy initiatives have been described in China (Shao and Wu, 2007), Thailand (Akaranithi and Punlay, 2007) and Japan (Head, 2006). On the evidence of these reports, national policies favouring student-centred language learning are to be found in many parts of the world. Such policies create a favourable climate of discourse for experiments in autonomy, but such experiments can also be discouraged by economic assumptions about the costs of education and the nature of teaching, which have led to increased workloads and a narrowing of focus of teachers’ work to the delivery of mandated curricula and assessment of students’ work (Lamb, 2008; Smith, 2006).

As Ecclestone (2002) notes in the context of vocational education, policies favouring autonomy are often driven by the view that investment in the education of individuals offers the best chance of economic survival for nations ‘at risk’ from the forces of globalisation. This reasoning, however, is also linked to broader views of the nature of work and competency in so-called ‘post-industrial’ or ‘new capitalist’ economies. The new capitalism, it is argued, is primarily based on services and knowledge work and, in the face of rapid technological change, generic skills, flexibility and the ability to learn how to learn are at a premium. Gee (2004) describes the kinds of individuals favoured by the new capitalism as ‘shape-shifting portfolio people’, who must constantly be ready to rearrange their portfolios of skills, experiences, and achievements creatively in order to define themselves as competent and worthy (Quote 1.6). This image will, no doubt, resonate...
with anyone who works in a post-industrial economy, and perhaps especially so with language teachers, who are now not only surrounded by discourses on the qualities of graduates that are preferred by new capitalist employers, but are required to manifest these qualities in their increasingly insecure professional lives. Again these changes have created favourable climates of discourse for experiments in autonomy, while also creating the risk that such experiments will be seen as harnessing educational goals to newly conceptualised needs of employers.

**Quote 1.6** Gee on shape-shifting portfolio people

Shape-shifting portfolio people are people who see themselves in entrepreneurial terms. That is, they see themselves as free agents in charge of their own selves as if those selves were projects or businesses. They believe they must manage their own risky trajectories through building up a variety of skills, experiences, and achievements in terms of which they can define themselves as successful now and worthy of more success later. Their set of skills, experiences, and achievements, at any one time, constitutes their portfolio. However, they must also stand ready and able to rearrange these skills, experiences, and achievements creatively (that is, to shape-shift into different identities) in order to define themselves anew (as competent and worthy) for changed circumstances.

Gee (2004: 105)

The idea of the self as ‘project’ is also prevalent within the self-improvement culture that has now begun to invade so many aspects of everyday life in post-industrial societies. For Cameron (2002) self-improvement culture comprises a range of practices and text-types, including self-help and popular psychology books, and ‘confessional’ TV shows on which people talk out their experiences, problems and feelings in public (Quote 1.7). To these we might add practices and text-types concerned with personal health and safety, diet and physical fitness, beauty and bodily improvement, body decoration and modification, and mental well-being. Informal adult foreign language learning, at evening classes or using broadcast media, can also be considered part of this self-improvement culture, especially where there is an intention to use foreign language for work or travel, but also where it is seen simply as a form of personal development. Cameron, however, focuses more on the general importance of ‘communication skills’ within self-improvement culture – an importance that reflects their role as a recognised qualification for employment in new capitalist economies.
Quote 1.7 Deborah Cameron on self-improvement culture

What I am calling ‘self-improvement culture’ comprises a range of practices and text-types focusing on the individual and her or his relationships with others, and particularly on the problems of modern personal life. Among the most accessible expressions of this culture are self-help and popular psychology books, and broadcast talk shows of the ‘confessional’ type where people talk about their experiences, problems and feelings, sometimes receiving advice from an expert (a therapist, counsellor or psychologist). Large numbers of people are at least occasional consumers of this kind of material, and it is so ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture that it is difficult for anyone to remain entirely unfamiliar with it.

(Cameron, 2002: 74)

Lastly, a somewhat different kind of concern with the self has been documented in recent interdisciplinary research on global mobility and identity that has problematised the traditional view that identities are fixed by circumstances of birth and upbringing (Bauman, 2004; Giddens, 1991; Hannerz, 1996). Often described as ‘post-structuralist’, this research argues that processes of mobility and displacement associated with globalisation are obliging individuals to take more and more responsibility for the construction of their own identities, albeit under certain social and cultural constraints. It has also been argued that self-narratives play an important role in this new ‘identity work’: our identities are increasingly framed within the stories that we tell about our lives (Giddens, 1991).

For individuals who learn and use a second language, this kind of identity work may be especially important. Engagement with a second language inevitably destabilises first language identities and provokes reconstruction of the individual’s sense of self to accommodate the fact of learning and using a second language. It has also been observed that sustained experiences of language learning involving mobility can enhance the individuality of the learner’s sense of identity (Benson, Chik and Lim, 2003). The idea that language learning involves identity work has begun to play an increasingly important role in language education research, especially in post-structuralist studies in which language identities are viewed as multiple, fragmented and dynamic (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000). From this perspective, autonomy, or an ongoing sense of being in control of one’s own identity to some degree, could be viewed as the glue that holds identities together. Straub, Zielke and Werbik (2005), for example, have adopted this point of view, arguing that autonomy is not grounded
in substantive pre-existing identities, but in identities that become individualised over time through self-thematisation and self-narrative (Chapter 2.4.1).

To sum up, developments in the landscape of language education, educational policy and broader economic and cultural environments have converged in recent years to create a climate that favours a growth of interest in autonomy in language learning. While it would seem churlish for advocates of autonomy not to welcome this growth of interest, it has nevertheless been viewed as somewhat problematic, in part, because autonomy no longer seems to be an incontrovertibly ‘good thing’ in education (Hand, 2006; Olssen, 2005).

1.7 The two faces of autonomy

Early experiments in self-directed learning and autonomy drew sustenance from the social and ideological changes of their times. Gremmo and Riley (1995) suggest that the rise of autonomy corresponded to an ideological shift away from consumerism and materialism towards an emphasis on the meaning and value of personal experience, quality of life, personal freedom and minority rights. In higher education, the notion of ‘student power’ was current (Cockburn and Blackburn, 1970), and radically student-centred educational reforms were being proposed by Freire (1970), Illich (1971), Rogers (1969) and others. Advocates of autonomy who come from this countercultural tradition are, therefore, liable to be somewhat sceptical of the ways that learner autonomy is now represented in educational and social discourse, not so much because these are diluted representations, but more because of a sense that the idea of autonomy is being coopted to proposals that fail to problematise the idea of education as a means to prepare students for the world of work.

The problem that research needs to address is, perhaps, the inherent ambiguity in the assumption that autonomy in learning is a good thing for all concerned. Have economic, social and educational systems across the world really changed to such an extent that we need no longer think of autonomy in terms of a shift in the balance of power towards learners? Have the interests of students, educational systems and employers in the new capitalist economies really converged to such an extent that we no longer need to tease out pedagogies that serve the interests of students from pedagogies that produce the kinds of graduates that employers are deemed to require?
In an important contribution to the literature on educational reform in England, Bentley (1998) directly links ‘active learning’ and ‘learning beyond the classroom’ to concerns about the ‘employability’ of young people. Bentley shows how ‘the role of education in developing employability has gradually come into focus, and educationalists and employers have moved towards each other, building closer partnerships, developing a common language, and seeking ways to achieve shared goals’ (p. 99). One of the major obstacles to reform, he argues, is the ‘separation of different perspectives on the same problem, and the lack of communication and mutual understanding between schools, parents, employers and pupils over a set of goals which are common to all’ (p. 106). While Bentley favours greater learner autonomy, his assumption of a common set of interests among educational stakeholders appears to undermine the principle of learners making key decisions about their learning, rather than following what schools, parents and employers deem to be their best interests.

While schools clearly have a broad responsibility to prepare students for future employment, the risk in arguments for autonomy in learning based on employability is that it will become difficult to conceptualise the educational value of autonomy in anything other than economic terms (Concept 1.4). Broader social visions of education contributing to the formation of democratic communities of self-determined individuals are also liable to be erased in favour of a much narrower vision of the harnessing of educational goals to the requirements of employers. Addressing these concerns does not necessarily imply an explicitly oppositional approach to language education. It does imply, however, that concerns about the goals of education should not be divorced from the practice of teaching and learning. Fostering autonomy requires, above all, a focus on the learners’ perspectives in regard to goals and processes. As Holec (1985a: 182) argues:

> Providing yourself with the means to undertake your own learning programme presupposes that, at the very least, you think it is possible to be both ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ of such a programme. This runs counter to the usual attitudes of members of our modern consumer society; indeed for the individual it means withdrawing from it to some extent, since the usual procedure for acquiring ‘goods’ (in this case competence in a foreign language) is not a creative one.

Although the idea of autonomy in learning currently appears to be in harmony with the needs of new capitalist economies and with other social and cultural trends, it does not arise from them, nor is it dependent upon them. Fostering learner autonomy remains a matter of allowing the interests of learners to emerge and take priority, rather than one of meeting the
interests of those who require their skills. The more difficult issue, however, is to separate out these two kinds of interests in both theoretical and practical work.

**Quote 1.8** Pennycook on the ‘psychologisation’ of autonomy

The idea of autonomy has therefore moved rapidly from a more marginal and politically engaged concept to one in which questions are less and less commonly asked about the larger social or educational aims of autonomy. Broader political concerns about autonomy are increasingly replaced by concerns about how to develop strategies for learner autonomy. The political has become the psychological.

Pennycook (1997: 41)

Placing this argument in the context of language education, there is currently a global trend for education providers to see language skills as a form of economic capital. As language educators respond to this trend, there is a risk that the focus in work on autonomy will shift away from learner control over the goals, purposes and long-term direction of language learning to the development of the learning-to-learn skills that underpin a capacity for control over learning (Quote 1.8). Although Pennycook may overstate the extent to which this is characteristic of research on autonomy itself, there is justifiable concern that the freedoms implied by learner autonomy are being reduced to consumer choices. Little (2007: 2) also has argued that learner autonomy is now ‘often understood to entail nothing more than allowing learners choice – not necessarily an open choice, but the opportunity to select from two or three alternatives offered by the teacher’. It is mainly in relation to this reduced form that the emphasis on autonomy in language education has been questioned (Holliday, 2003, 2005; Pennycook, 1997; Schmenk, 2005; Sonaiya, 2002). This questioning has also led to a number of attempts to identify ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ approaches to the theory and practice of autonomy (Chapter 3).