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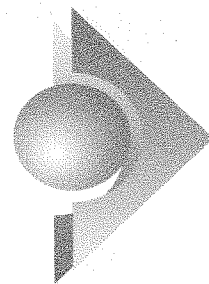
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IN QUESTO NUMERO

Presentiamo in questo numero alcune delle relazioni che sono state tenute a Firenze, durante il congresso ANILS di ottobre: l'editoriale, della vice-presidente Luisa Marci Corona, è il sunto della sua relazione "di indirizzo" e ripropone con forza il tema della dimensione politica dell'insegnamento delle lingue.

Seguono due relazioni metodologiche; altre relazioni erano state già presentate su SeLM: Balboni 8/2000, Capasso 7/2001, Coonan 5-6/2000, Kismarjay 2/2001, Minardi 2/2001, ed alcune seguiranno nei prossimi numeri. Come sempre, abbiamo dato spazio anche alle esperienze - cosa che ha caratterizzato il convegno fiorentino, dove la voce delle scuole ha avuto un ruolo dominante.

A new frontier. Autonomy in second language learning. Sink or swim?

John Wade

When they reached the middle of the forest the father told the children to collect wood to make a fire and keep them warm; and Hansel and Grethel gathered brushwood enough for a little mountain; and it was set on fire, and when the flame was burning quite high the wife said, 'Now lie down by the fire and rest yourselves, you children, and we will go and cut wood; and when we are ready we will come and fetch you'.

From Grimm's Fairy Tales

Introduction

The story of Hansel and Grethel is well known in European culture, and in many ways it could be considered as the archetypal instance of acquiring autonomy by necessity after being abandoned by a nasty step-mother and inept but loving father. In the end the children survive by using their innate intelligence and with a degree of good luck.

This concept of acquiring autonomy, however common it may be, should find little affinity with the acquisition of autonomy in an educational context where abandonment on the part of educators is, theoretically, not contemplated. The learner requires support and guidance in the process of becoming autonomous, in the first place to make the most of the resources he/she has at his/her disposal and, in the second place, to maximise the time which the learner has available for study. It is the purpose of the first part of this paper to examine what learner autonomy consists of both in general terms and also specifically as concerns the acquisition of a second or foreign language, and moreover how the acquisition of autonomy may be considered part of the learning process.

Models of autonomous learning are illustrated and factors which can influence the

development of learner autonomy are discussed with practical examples of how autonomy can be fostered from within the classroom, rather than relying solely on self-access or self-study facilities.

In conclusion a dynamic model for fostering learner autonomy is proposed.

Defining autonomy

In order to better understand what autonomy is, it may be enlightening to examine what it is not, since there are many misconceptions about the concept, generally due to the fact that it is often associated with a 'sink or swim' approach, similar to Hansel and Grethel's dramatic experience illustrated above. Little (1990, cited in Benson 2001, p.48) provides an exhaustive list:

Autonomy is **not** a synonym for self-instruction; in other words, autonomy is **not** limited to learning without a teacher.

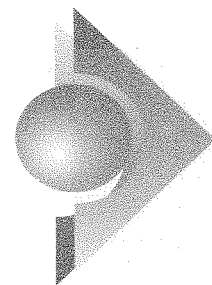
In the classroom context, autonomy does **not** entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; it is **not** a matter of letting the learners get on with things as best they can.

On the other hand, autonomy is **not** something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is **not** another teaching method.

Autonomy is **not** a single, easily described behaviour.

Autonomy is **not** a steady state achieved by learners.

What is important in the above list is the fact that autonomy is not perceived as the abandonment of the learner and that the teacher has an important role to play in fostering it and, moreover, it is not a universally definable quality, since it may vary from individual to individual and from context to context. Kenny (1993, p. 440) provides a more satisfactory definition of autonomy in terms of overall educational objectives which take into account the whole learner, rather than specifically directed and compartmentalised disciplinary areas:



Autonomy is not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations, or making pupils responsible for the activities they undertake, but of allowing and encouraging learners, through processes deliberately set up for the purpose, to begin to express who they are, what they think, and what they would like to do, in terms of work they initiate and define for themselves.

In this sense the acquisition of autonomy on the part of the learner is intimately linked to the learning process, whether we are discussing language learning or the development of the learner in any other discipline. This has far reaching implications, therefore, in a wider educational context than that of language teaching.

The learning process

The active role of the teacher in the educational process is often erroneously considered to be that of providing knowledge, which in turn provides the learner with the raw material to ensure his/her intellectual growth. However, this concept of knowledge is severely restricted and prescriptive in its nature, since it seeks to

impose a vision of the world on the learner. An alternative view can be taken in which knowledge is held as "conflictual" and "socially constructed" in its nature, that knowledge interacts with each individual learner in order to create new realities, not simply one absolute truth. It would not be overly inappropriate to observe that in many educational contexts it is merely reduced to "a mausoleum of dead facts" (Tadeu de Silva and McLaren, 1993, p. 43).

It is not sufficient to consider the learning process to be the mere accumulation of data, but how the learner interacts with the data provided by the teacher. This is very close to how Kolb (1984, p. 52) views the development of the learner, whereby:

Learning, the creation of knowledge, occurs through the active extension and grounding of ideas and experiences in the external world and through internal reflection about the attributes of these experiences and ideas.

Kolb's model is represented below in simplified form (Figure 1):

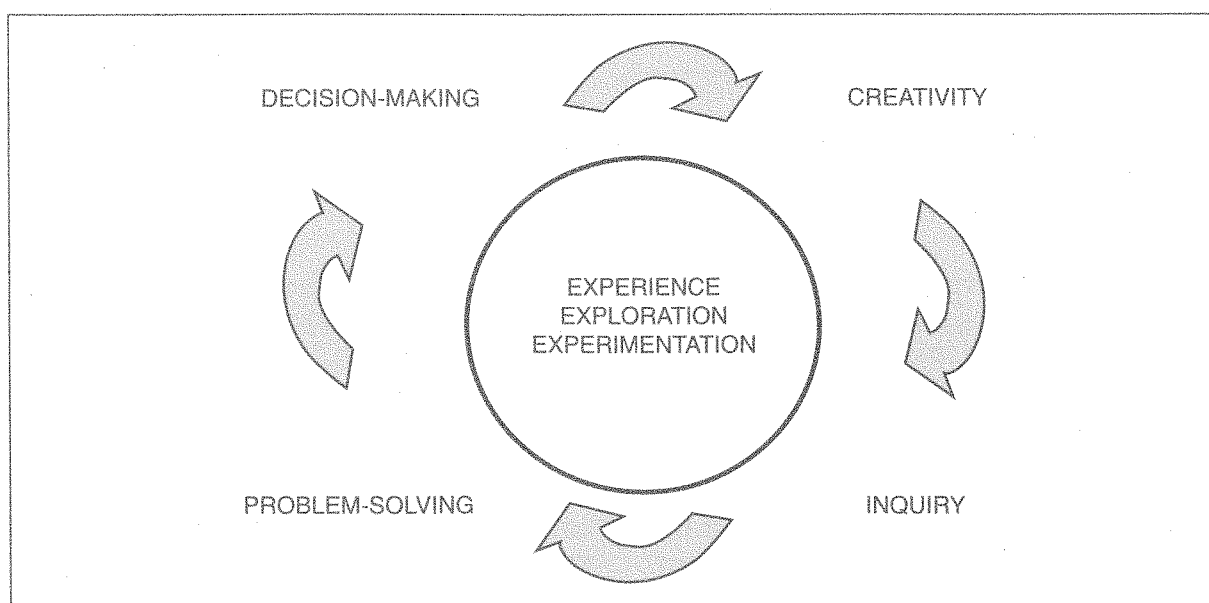
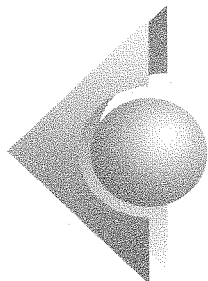


Figure 1. The learning process (based on Kolb, 1993).

Central to this concept of the learning process is the idea of experience, which may be viewed as giving the learner the opportunity to experiment or explore areas of knowledge (in our specific case

knowledge of a second language). Such exploration can take place through inquiry, problem-solving and decision making. These approaches are common in modern language teaching methodolo-



gies, where learners are required to deal with real life situations, to interact with each other and to experiment with the Target Language. The first steps towards the ability to carry out such tasks take place within the classroom under the guidance of the teacher. This in turn plays greatly on the creativity of the individual, which acts as a catalyst or stimulus for the learner. This can be conceived as a continuous cycle, where the learner's creativity is fed by the inquiry, problem solving and decision making process.

These ideas are certainly not new, and Kolb draws heavily on the thinking of Dewey and Freire, where the vision of the educational process may be described as democratic, in the sense that the centrality of the learner in a negotiable educa-

tional context forms the foundation for the development of the whole person rather than a disgregated series of notionally and prescriptively dictated norms.

In practical terms, Zimmerman's (1998, p. 1) model of "self-regulated learning" attempts to put the experiential model of learning into practice. Again we observe a cycle which consists of three elements. Firstly a "forethought" phase, which implies the ability to plan on the part of the learner, secondly a "volitional control" phase, in which the learner puts plans into action and thirdly the "self-reflection" phase, where the learner analyses the action carried out in order to continue the cycle with further planning, modifications or fine-tuning. This cycle is illustrated below in Figure 2:

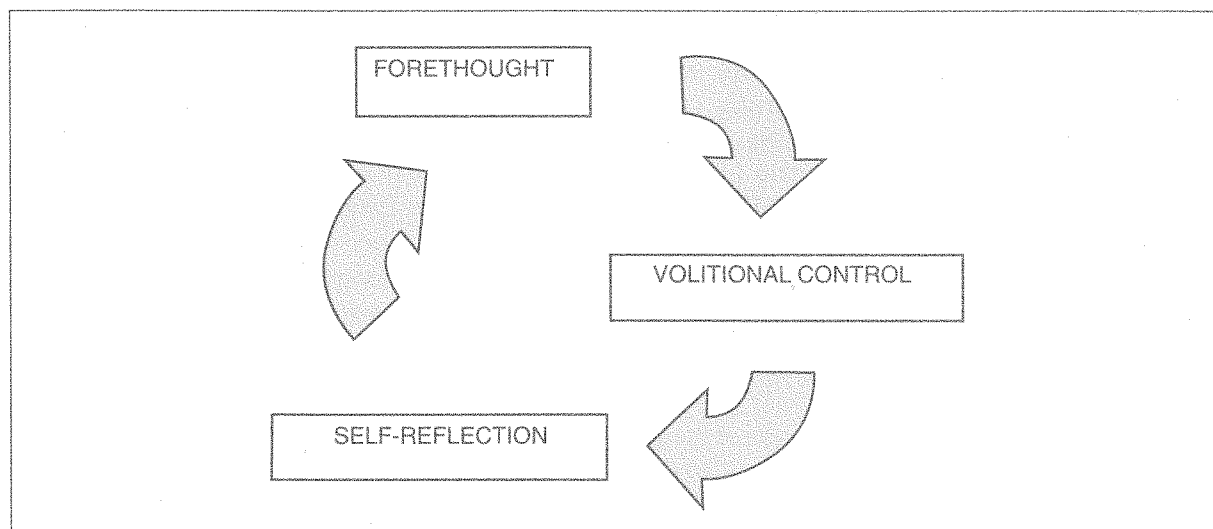
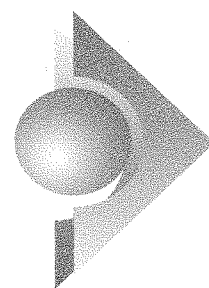


Figure 2. Self-regulated learning (based on Zimmerman, 1998, p. 5).

These ideas are very close to those of Gremmo and Riley (1995), who use the term "self-directed learning", in a specific language learning context, where the language learner acquires autonomy by taking control of the learning process (Holec, 1981, p. 3). While great emphasis is placed on the ground-breaking work carried out by Holec and others into the effective organisation of self-access facilities at the CRAPEL of the University of Nancy, it should not be forgotten that this is only one element in the fostering autonomy in the language learner, and the provision of such facilities is no guarantee that the learner will become a proficient language user. The road to autonomy starts in the

classroom, with a change of role for the teacher from that of fount of knowledge to one of guide or "counsellor" (Gremmo and Riley, 1995, p. 159).

An example of how the learning process, as perceived by the teacher, can break down can be given from personal experience. In a small scale survey carried out with a group of forty-eight students at the *Centro Linguistico di Ateneo* of the University of Cagliari, designed to discover how learners study outside the classroom, it was discovered that the vast majority dedicated their time to grammar study and the writing of compositions. These activities were specifically directed by the teacher, while other activities,



which could be considered beneficial to improving language knowledge, were neglected. The results of the survey are shown below in **Table 1**. Note that some respondents carried out more than one type of activity.

Table 1. Student activities outside the classroom.

Activity type	n.
Grammar	39
Composition	30
Watching films in the original language	14
Reading English books	11
Reading newspapers and magazines	5
Listening to songs	5
Reading specialised articles (medicine, etc.)	5
Exploring the Internet	3
Speaking with friends or colleagues	3
Translation	2
Satellite TV	

the original language outside the classroom, either at home or in the self-access facility available to students of the *Centro Linguistico*, his learners would have been aware of a wider range of language improvement strategies open to them.

The degree of control over the learning process which a learner may possess may be influenced by four elements, each of which interacts with the other. Firstly there are such eminently concrete factors as the content of a language course, usually dictated by a clearly defined syllabus, and facilities available for learning, which could, for example, include a self-access centre or library. Secondly, there is the learner's ability to organise his/her learning and the cognitive processes which lead to the acquisition of the second language, a factor which is not easily externalisable on the part of the learner. The consequent control of the learning process on the part of the learner may contribute to a successful learning behaviour and the creation of a specifically tailored learning environment. This is illustrated below in **Figure 3**:

If the teacher had integrated activities in classroom work to encourage reading, exploring the Internet or watching films in

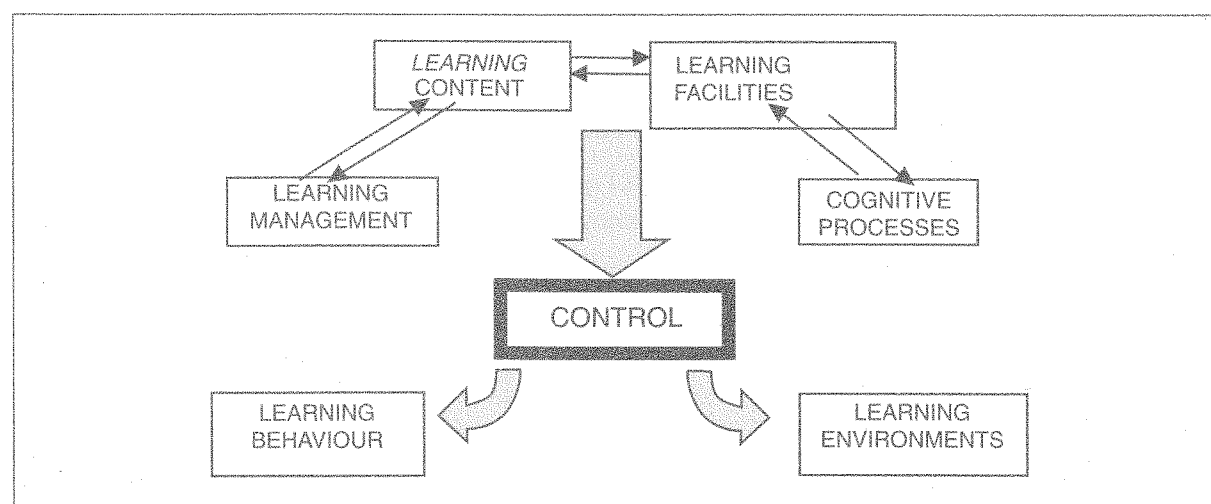


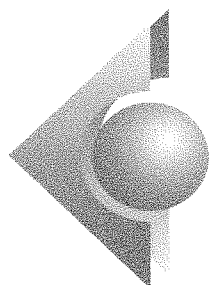
Figure 3. Control of the learning process (based on Benson, 2001, p. 50).

On the basis of **Figure 3**, we can observe that the learner has a significant role to play not only in his/her own learning, but also, potentially, in the creation of the learning environment, since an increased awareness of why he/she is learning a second language, how this process comes about and how it may be organised in the most effective way could be a significant element in creating what could be termed a *negotiated learning environment*.

Attention now turns to how the learner's consciousness can be raised with regard to those factors which can influence the degree of learner autonomy.

Factors influencing degrees of learner autonomy

Some of the factors which can influence an individual learner's degree of autonomy are summarised below in **Table 2**:



COGNITIVE	METACOGNITIVE	AFFECTIVE	SOCIOCULTURAL
Processing language input	Organising the learning process Self-assessment	Attitude towards learning Target Language Motivation Self-esteem	Perception of Target Language culture Perceived status of Target Language Defining student/teacher roles

Table 2. Factors influencing learner autonomy.

While cognitive factors hold great importance in the acquisition of a second language, for the purposes of this paper closer attention will be given to those metacognitive factors which may be employed in fostering the autonomy of the learner.

In the first place these factors concern the way in which the learning process is organised, and Wenden (1995) suggests that activities can be integrated into the language syllabus to raise learners' awareness as to how this process takes place, for example by reading a text which maintains that

learning to ride a bicycle is similar to learning a second or foreign language, or trying to provide a definition of what a 'good' language learner is, exchanging opinions about personal experiences regarding the learning of the Target Language. In the second place, task-type questionnaire can be used when introducing language learning activities to a class or group of learners, so that they can analyse why they are doing that particular activity and how it can be carried out most effectively. This is illustrated below in Table 3:

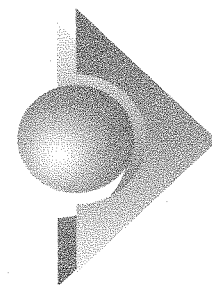
AWARENESS Have I done/learned something like this before? ■ What kind of task is this? ■ Am I familiar with this kind of work? MOTIVATION Why should I do this task? ■ Will it help me acquire the language skills I need? ■ Will I learn or will I have to show what I know? PROCEDURES How should I do this task? ■ What knowledge and skills do I need? ■ What do I already know? ■ What can I already do? ■ How do I divide the task? ■ What should I do first, second ... ? ■ What strategies will I need to use?
--

Table 3. Task awareness questionnaire (based on Wenden, 1995, p. 191).

The design of language activities could be made more explicit, with a clearer reference to why the learning is carrying out the task and what he/she can hope to achieve from it (Sinclair, 1996).

Further to this, the learner should be able to evaluate his/her own progress, as proposed by Oscarson (1989). He suggests the

use of a continuous assessment card or periodic self-assessment questionnaire to aid learners in this process, or encourage them to keep a learning diary. Furthermore, learners could be filmed with a video camera while they carry out communication tasks. Their language performance at the beginning and at the end of the course



could be compared, for instance. This also has the advantage of providing concrete documentation of a learner's progress.

In addition to organisational skills, affective factors play an important role in dictating the success of the language learner. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 46-47) claim that:

Learning, particularly the learning of a language, is an emotional experience, and the feelings that the learning process evokes will have a crucial bearing on the success or failure of the learning.

Breen and Mann (1997, p. 134) observe that in order to be successful, a learner needs to be possessed of a "robust sense of self", and that this provides the learner with the sense of independence and direction which allows him/her to take responsibility for the learning which has been undertaken. Closely linked to this is the motivation which the learner has for taking up a course of study. This is illustrated by Dickinson (1995) in her description of Mary and Susan. Mary is an extremely anxious language learner, who studies in order to pass tests and to get through her language lessons. Susan, on the other hand, studies because she likes it, she is internally motivated. During the summer vacation, with great relief, Mary abandoned all thought of language study, while Susan continued to study and read in the Target Language. If learners can be encouraged to continue the process of learning outside the classroom, not for the instrumental motivation of pleasing the teacher (see example related to Table 1), but for a genuine interest in the language, then a sound basis for successful language learning will be laid, not only within an institutionalised educational context, but beyond, in the real world where such knowledge may be practically useful. Such motivation can be encouraged from within the classroom by providing guidance in project work or research into areas which are of interest to the learners themselves. To take as an example, we could use the recent project to translate the best selling Harry Potter series into Latin, with the aim of teaching that language through a means which may be intrinsically motivat-

ing for teenage learners, and which could provide a solid basis for a later study of the classics.

Finally, sociocultural factors will also have an influence, from two points of view. Firstly, and most obviously, learning a second language entails understanding and to some degree accepting, if the learner is to be successful, a culture which is different from that of our own. Jin and Cortazzi (1998, p. 114) suggest a model based on what they term "cultural synergy", whereby those dealing with a different culture should be aware of subtle differences which may exist between one culture and another, in terms of how the world is viewed. A good example of this is illustrated by Kramsch (1998, p. 17), who analyses the diverse attitudes of teachers from different nationalities towards a French advertisement. While the general message of the advertisement was well understood, the underlying connotative value of the linguistic content held differing values for the different nationalities involved in the activity. While the French participants based their interpretation on a largely historical perspective, culturally specific to their own country, the other participants brought interpretations from their own cultures and perceptions of the world to the discussion. This type of activity raises the learner's awareness of cultural diversity.

Secondly, in terms of how a teacher is viewed, since if the teacher's role is modified, as described above, to that of guide, then it may not be compatible with the learner's view of what a teacher should be. This is perhaps not so much the case with Italian learners, but it may hold importance for learners of Italian as a second language (for example, those of Chinese origin) within the Italian state school system, who could feel uncomfortable with such an approach (see Cortazzi and Jin, 1998; Ho and Crookall, 1995).

A dynamic model for fostering learner autonomy

Taking into consideration all the factors described above, it is possible to draw up an institutional model for the fostering of learner autonomy, within a structure

which aims to balance more effectively the contribution of three elements: the in-

stitution, the teacher and the learner. This is illustrated below in **Figure 4**:

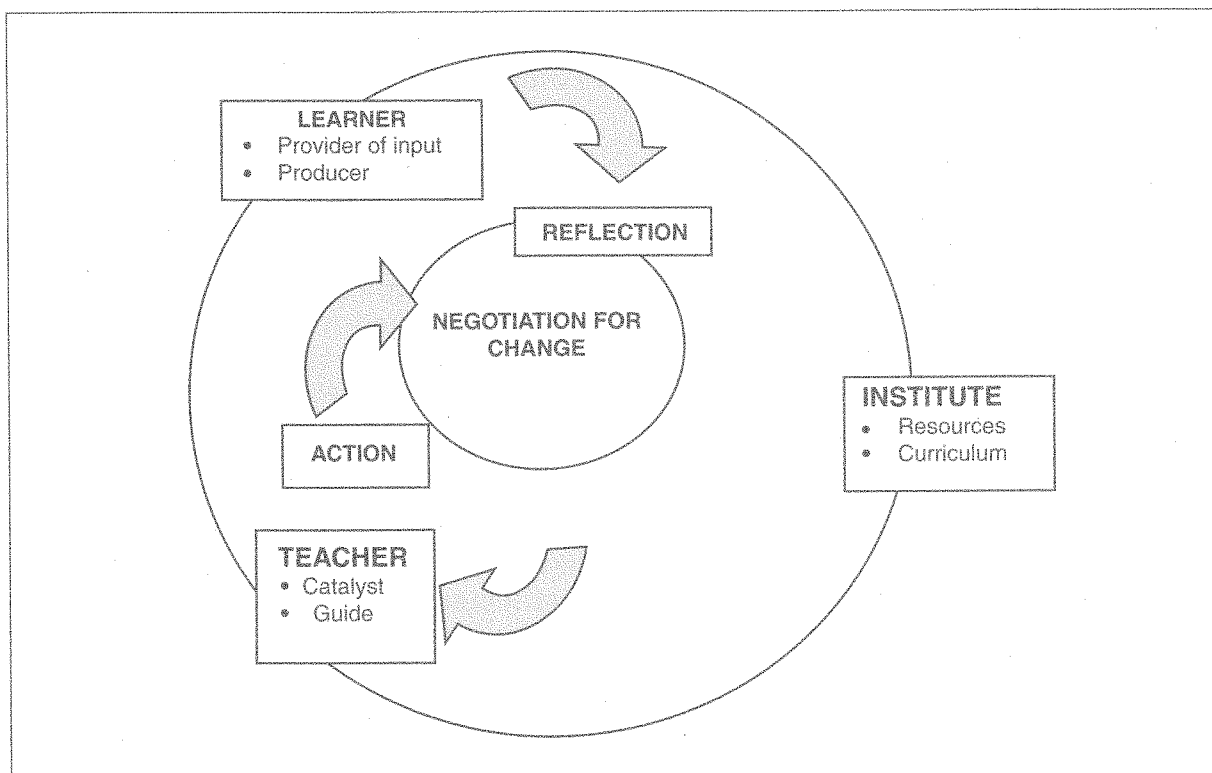
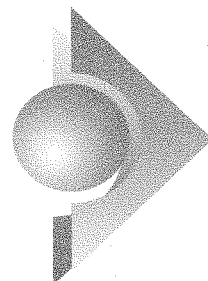


Figure 4. A dynamic model for fostering learner autonomy.

It is to be noted that the negotiability of the learning experience, in terms of curriculum and syllabus, is central to an ongoing process of planning, action and reflection, and that the learner is required to provide input as part of this cycle. If this is the case, then while this model could be used in the specific context of the language department of an educational institute, it also implies greater co-operation across departmental boundaries in, for instance, the use of the second language in the teaching of other subjects, in order to aid the development of the individual learner as a whole person.

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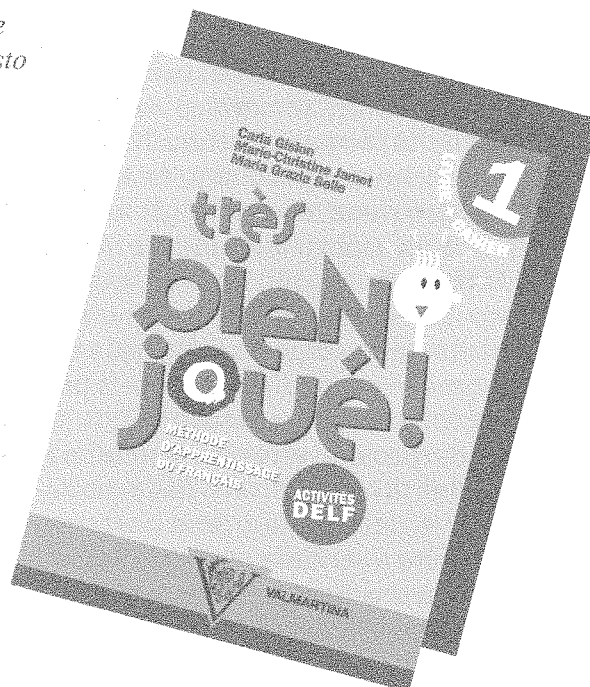
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