

# Mass Customization and Learner Autonomy: A Mexican Perspective

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## Abstract

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Customization of services or products fundamentally involves choices being made by the customer. This paper explores the conception of learner autonomy in language learning and its relationship to the capacity of students to make choices about their own education as a prerequisite for implementing mass customization in learning support. A study of the impediments to learner autonomy in a Mexican context indicates some of the conceptual and cultural issues that should be addressed in implementing mass customization in language learning.

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## 1 Introduction

In the search for the transformation of education, one of the strategies in the national education policies in México has been making students the centre of the teaching and learning process. These strategies focus on reinforcing learning by promoting students' analytical skills, their ability to generate information and knowledge, and the ability to take decisions in their personal and professional lives.

The Mexican government sets targets for both coverage and quality of education. At first the educational policies put the emphasis on coverage, so that mass education was the target. Perhaps learning basic skills using the mother tongue and arithmetic was sufficient to have a useful life, and the government reported the increases in number of people receiving this educational service.

The rapid changes in the way we live are demanding basic and diverse knowledge and skills to function in society. Intellectual challenges are taking place in each field of our lives and this is happening rapidly. The university must respond to the need to offer higher education to an increasing percentage of school leavers, while the quality of education is evaluated both by peer evaluation schemes instituted by government and numerically by the percentage of students who receive their degrees. There is pressure on the universities to present data for evaluation which demonstrates that it is meeting targets, and funding crucially depends on positive indicators. National education policy explicitly supports innovation in education, in particular the development of learner independence, provided quality indicators are positively affected (Secretaría de Educación Pública, n.d.).

In response to national policy, some institutions have initiated programmes to make students more independent and autonomous in their learning. The promotion of autonomy in learning needs to be understood by all participants in the education process (students, teachers and institution), and if the students are the central performers in this process their understanding of autonomy in learning and their views on this issue may bring us a better understanding for supporting an educational service that promotes learning autonomy.

Advances in providing educational services must consider the rapidly changing environment and this may require that the educational institution create knowledge to combine mass cus-

tomization approaches for the educational services, calling for strategic flexibility (cf. Godhar and Jelinek 1985, Pine 1993). The need for education and the individual differences of learners suggest the relevance of the flexibility and quick response in the service associated with mass customization (cf. Pine 1993, Davis 1987).

There is a need to meet the Mexican government's targets for both coverage and quality of education, implying a standardized education for all, and at the same time to provide enough variety of services to meet the individual differences in learning and different interests. And this, as researchers have suggested, will require different organizational structures, management, values and roles, systems, learning methods and ways to relating to the students and teachers (cf. Pine 1993). One way to acknowledge and meet these challenges has been the promotion of autonomy in language learning both within institutions and at policy level.

Autonomous language learners are of interest from a mass customization perspective to the degree to which they are willing and able to exercise choices about what they learn and how they learn it (cf. Benson 2001).

## **2 Learner autonomy**

Autonomy in language learning has been the subject of books and articles for 30 years now, and many Mexican universities provide facilities for autonomous learners in self-access centres and in classroom practices that respect autonomous learning. However, the field of learner autonomy is still affected by conflicting definitions, beliefs and policies which make it difficult to provide systematic support for autonomous learners. In addition, although there are powerful arguments in support of learner autonomy, there are also serious criticisms of the concept which need to be addressed. I will attempt to map out the field of learner autonomy in this paper, starting with criticisms of autonomy. A critical approach to autonomy provides a tool for integrating valid and helpful descriptions of autonomy in learning. While institutions and the administrators and teachers who enact their policies may intend to support autonomous learning, conflicting beliefs and misunderstandings can frustrate the best efforts of learners and institutions. Some of the findings from a study of learner autonomy in a Mexican university are presented and discussed and may serve to illustrate these conflicts.

### **2.1 Critical views of autonomy**

The arguments presented in favour of learner autonomy are powerful and convincing. In a rapidly changing and competitive world, the ability to choose learning objectives and pursue them autonomously confers important advantages on autonomous language learners. However, there are criticisms of autonomy, which may be divided into two groups. Firstly, there are those that find autonomy an unsatisfactory educational goal (cf. Laurillard 2002, Hand 2006). Secondly, there are studies that suggest that some forms of autonomy may be pedagogically undesirable in certain cultures.

#### **2.1.1 Criticism of autonomy as an educational goal**

Laurillard (2002: 196), discussing pedagogy, states: "[...] beneath the rhetoric of 'giving students control over their learning' is a dereliction of duty." Laurillard's book is about the use of technology in university teaching in general and any application in language learning is purely incidental. She does not criticize autonomy as such, but in the literature students taking control of their learning is one of the fundamental principles of autonomy. Her comment cited above is all the more surprising as educational technology is usually thought to enhance and support autonomous learning (cf. Little 1996: 203, Milton 1997: 247, Schmenk 2005: 112), although for Milton attempts to mediate learning by replicating the roles of human tutors through electronic resources are inherently unsatisfactory and limit rather than enhance learn-

ing experiences. Farmer (2006: 211) suggests that the role of human tutors in managing the learning process does not invalidate student autonomy but rather provides the professional support learners need regardless of the degree of autonomy they may have. He considers that Laurillard's apparent opposition to autonomy may be seen as an objection to the withdrawal of teacher support for learners rather than an objection to any assertion of independence by the learner. Pennycook (1997: 439) is also critical of versions of autonomy which propose the withdrawal of teacher support. Interpreted in this way, Laurillard's seeming opposition to autonomy may be a timely warning that failing to provide adequate support for learners is professionally negligent, and does not imply that all learners need complete and constant expert attention.

Hand's (2006) criticisms of autonomy as an educational goal are more wide ranging and explicit than Laurillard's. He is not against autonomy as such, but rather against setting autonomy as a goal for education, and he presents two arguments to support his position. Firstly, he argues, autonomy in the sense of being free to exercise choice is desirable, but is a product of circumstances rather than education. If not actually under surveillance or physically constrained, people are able and willing from quite a young age to take appropriate action in pursuit of their aims. Secondly, he questions whether it is desirable for educators to seek to develop in learners a disposition to rely on their own judgment rather than that of experts or to resist legitimate authority. Although Hand is discussing education in general and makes no allusion to language teaching, his criticisms are relevant to autonomous language learning in a mass customization context.

If the questions posed by Laurillard and Hand do not, upon close inspection, amount to a rejection of autonomy, they nevertheless have a bearing on those versions of autonomy which advocate learner training as a requisite for exercising autonomy.

### **2.1.2 Cultural limitations to autonomy**

Riley (1988) raised concerns about the cultural implications of autonomy in language learning, and whether students from different cultures find different degrees of difficulty in adopting autonomous learning. Riley found that the readiness of students to adopt autonomy depended on their ethnic background, but the measure of what constituted autonomy was determined by the researcher so that there must be doubts about the validity of the findings. Nevertheless, there are widely held assumptions about different cultures and the effect of cultures on the autonomy of their members. In a Japanese context, Kubota (1999: 14) notes that Western culture is often characterized by Western educators as promoting individualism, self-expression, critical and analytic thinking, and extending knowledge. Asian culture, by contrast, values collectivism, harmony, indirection, memorization and conserving knowledge. These are all positive terms and may aim to describe cultures as equal but different, but the power relations involved in Western dominated ELT tend to favour Western values. Other researchers have differentiated between different cultural conceptualizations of autonomy. For instance, Pennycook (1997: 43) argues that certain kinds of autonomy may be a peculiarly Western construct, and that other manifestations of autonomy in different cultures may be difficult to detect for Western observers. An apparent clash between Western and local cultural values in relation to autonomy is also addressed by Jones (1995), who describes a self access centre in Cambodia where autonomy is not the goal, but where individual learning styles are supported through group activities. The reason Jones gives for steering away from striving to achieve autonomy is the supposed unsuitability of autonomy in Asian cultures. The research indicates that any apparent lack of autonomy in different cultures may mean either that autonomy is not possible in that culture or simply that it is not easily recognized by outside observers.

Clemente (2003) explores cultural factors in self access counselling in a Mexican university. The counselling situations she describes are dominated by mainly native speaker counsellors occupying a position of power in their relationship with Mexican students. She identifies cultural differences as one of the elements that caused problems in directing counselling sessions, agreeing appropriate discourses, and defining learning objectives. Clemente's study is especially interesting as there is little published research in autonomy in language learning in Mexico. Kubota (2002) finds the TESOL community to be well meaning and sympathetic, but deeply racist at bottom, while Clemente (2007) reports on English as a commodity with political value in publicizing the protesters' case in a bitter and lengthy strike of teachers in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. This is compatible with an uncomplicated functional view of English as simply a means whereby those with the misfortune to be born elsewhere can be heard by the people who matter in the USA, but acknowledges that Mexicans may have good reasons for learning English apart from those given in university curricula.

## 2.2 Descriptions of autonomy

The literature of language learner autonomy has tended to highlight the lack of general agreement regarding what it is and how it may be observed. However there have been attempts to synthesize the areas of agreement, and Sinclair's (2000: 7–13) analysis of learning autonomy contributes to a better understanding of the autonomous learning concept.

1. Autonomy is a construct of capacity. Sinclair relies here on Holec's (1981: 3) definition where the ability of learners to make informed decisions about their own learning is highlighted. It is important to emphasise as in Little's (1991: 4) definition of learning autonomy "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action".

2. Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning. "Learner autonomy [...] presupposes a positive attitude to the purpose, content and process of learning" (Little 1996: 204). For Sinclair, developing positive attitudes towards this is crucial to the success of the development of learner autonomy and is an essential, long term aim of any learner training programme.

3. The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate. According to Sinclair, it is assumed that this ability is acquired; that is, learners learn by learning to develop their own techniques and procedures for learning. Learning to learn has been linked with both strategy training, where learners are taught specific learning techniques, and with psychological preparation where learners are enabled to discover what works for them.

4. Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal. Sinclair cites Boud's (1981: 23) words, "autonomous learning is not an absolute standard to be met, but a goal to be pursued [...] the direction towards student responsibility for learning". She points out that the developing of autonomous learning is always constrained in some manner by the rules, cultural conventions, and political aspirations of the society to which the learners belong.

5. There are degrees of autonomy. From one extreme of 'complete lack of autonomy' to the other extreme of 'complete autonomy', individual learners will find themselves at different points along the continuum for different tasks, according to Sinclair. She suggests that the degree of autonomy will depend on levels of language competence, affective factors, prior learning and experience of the task itself.

6. The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable.

Degrees of autonomy fluctuate according to a wide range of variables, such as affective factors (e.g. mood), environment (e.g. noise, temperature), physiological factors (e.g. tiredness, hunger), motivation (e.g. attitude towards the task, the subject matter, the teacher, materials, co-learners) and so on. (Sinclair 2000: 8).

Sinclair maintains that in this way, even learners doing similar tasks on different occasions will display different degrees of autonomy.

7. Autonomy is not a simple matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent.

Learners can be encouraged or left to work on their own without organised support, but there is no guarantee that they will benefit from this experience in terms of developing a capacity for making informed decisions about their learning or in terms of improving their competence. (Sinclair 2000: 8)

Sinclair links unsupported learning with situations where learners have control over and responsibility for their learning, and suggests that teacher support is required for both encouraging learners to take more responsibility and the development of metacognitive awareness.

8. Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e., conscious reflection and decision making. Sinclair again highlights the need for the development of metacognitive awareness in learners. Metacognitive processes, according to Sinclair, involve reflection on learning: planning learning and setting goals, self-assessment and monitoring of progress, evaluating learning activities and exploiting learning resources.

9. Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies. "Learner training aims to help learners consider the factors which affect their learning and discover the learning strategies which suit them best and which are appropriate to their learning context" (Sinclair 2000: 11). The role of training in developing learning strategies in autonomy is accepted, but as part of a broader learner awareness and control of learning opportunities.

10. Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom. According to Sinclair, learner autonomy can be developed to encourage learners to reflect consciously on their learning in different learning contexts and through a variety of different learning modes, including classroom instruction, self-access learning, distance learning, and self-instruction. For Sinclair, the key feature of learner autonomy is planning, experimenting and reviewing and having the opportunity to make decisions, regardless of the setting.

11. Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension. For Sinclair, developing learner autonomy is not only concerned with the individual. Individual autonomy stresses the importance of individual learning styles over collaborative learning; in contrast, 'social autonomy' recognises that awareness raising and learning takes place through interaction and collaboration, as well as through individual reflection and experimentation.

12. The promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension. Autonomy is a concept with philosophical and ideological implications. In Crabbe's (1993: 443) words, "the individual has the right to be free to exercise his or her own choices, in learning as in other areas, and not become a victim [...] of choices made by social institutions". While this freedom is an essential human need, individual freedom in the political dimension is tempered by the need to act collectively and/or the limitations involved in acting collectively.

### **2.3 Autonomy in a Mexican institution**

In a study of autonomy in language learning in the Universidad de Quintana Roo (Llaven Nucamendi 2009), senior administrators, teachers and students' attitudes and beliefs about autonomy were investigated. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, triangulated with observations of behavior, and contributions were analysed to explore and compare participants' attitudes and beliefs about autonomy. Participants perceived the value of autonomy in learning, and did not need to be convinced of its intrinsic worth. But even though they recognised the desirability of this goal they doubted that it could be fully achieved because of the many problems they face.

These problems reflect some understanding of what autonomy in learning is and some positive as well as negative attitudes towards it. Nevertheless, it seems that interviewees were unable to describe completely and clearly their understanding of autonomy in language learning, or describe their attempts to practise self-study, self-learning or independent learning, which are terms mentioned in university documents and which senior management refer to everyday. Nevertheless, these attempts to practise autonomy have given them an insight into what is stopping them achieving it. The main difficulties participants in the study mentioned are:

- lack of experience and skills
- students' learning preferences
- dependency on the teacher
- educational background
- lack of understanding of what autonomy in learning is
- lack of time to study
- lack of training for students, teachers and senior administrators
- attitudes towards autonomy in learning
- teachers' skills and profiles
- national educational policies
- administrative services

Students and senior administrators also considered the difficulties and problems in terms of the consequences that the promotion of autonomy may have. Students feel that it may result in their taking a less disciplined approach to study and to confusion in learning. One administrator shared the confusion students experience and commented that time would be wasted if neither autonomy in learning nor directed learning is achieved. This may suggest that senior administrators and students can see some dangers in the promotion of autonomous learning.

The potential for the development of autonomy in the institution is there with attempts having already been made, whether successful or not, and the provision of comprehensive resources of materials, equipment and tutorial services in the Self-Access Centre. Participants were optimistic and realistic about fostering autonomy in language learning in the institution, and considered that it is already taking place to some extent.

### **2.4 Learner autonomy and mass customization of language learning.**

Whether clients are making choices about bicycle parts (cf. Kotha 1995) or selecting modules of an academic programme (cf. Ausburn 2002), the capacity and willingness of to take deci-

sions is paramount. The Mexican experience of trying to promote learner autonomy suggests that learners will need considerable support in engaging with the choices inherent in mass customization, and it seems likely that mass customization in language learning projects will not be easily transferrable across cultures. However, there is great potential for elements of mass customization where large numbers of students need similar though not identical services. In addition to modular courses where learner needs can be met through learner choice, there is potential for improving both the quality and timing of feedback on both written and spoken production using the principles of mass customization, for example.

### 3 Conclusions

The way the conceptualization of autonomy interacts with different cultures is both important and complex. For instance, including learning a language in the curriculum can be seen as cultural imperialism, or alternatively as a means of escaping from a different cultural imperialism (cf. Clemente 2007). As far as autonomy in language learning is concerned, there are three points to note here. Firstly, where autonomy is encouraged in an institutional setting, autonomy does not provide an excuse for teachers to abandon their dedication or professionalism. Further, autonomy is not a universal construct which takes the same form all over the world. What some individuals may see as autonomy, and what they may strive for to make themselves autonomous will be different from others' perceptions and desires. This will vary according to culture, but also according to many other factors from individual to individual. Finally, even teacher or tutor behaviour that seems to inhibit learner autonomy can create unexpected spaces for learner autonomy.

Introducing elements of mass customization into language learning will involve taking care to match the decisions learners need to make with their degree of autonomy, and providing extra support as required. The success of any mass customization project is likely to be due as much to cultural conditions and individual learners' capacities as to the design of the learning programme and it should not be assumed that a successful scheme can be transferred unaltered to a different situation.

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