

# **AUTONOMY AND SOCIAL LEARNING IN A PUBLIC SERVICE SELF-ACCESS LANGUAGE CENTRE**

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## **Mots-clés**

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## **Keywords**

Autonomous learning, public self-access centre, learners' preferences, social learning

## **Résumé**

Dans cet article, les auteures réfléchissent à la manière dont les enseignements tirés des connaissances sur l'autonomie peuvent être mis en pratique en tenant compte de la spécificité des contextes locaux et sociaux de deux centres d'apprentissage des langues en libre accès dans le nord de l'Italie. Offrir des services d'orientation et de soutien à l'auto-apprentissage, des possibilités d'interaction sociale et d'intégration sont des fonctions essentielles des centres. Après une analyse du contexte de création et de développement des centres et leur fonctionnement, les futurs projets visant à développer la sensibilisation des apprenants dans les familles et les écoles sont brièvement décrits.

## **Abstract**

In this paper, the authors reflect on how insights from the literature on autonomy can be put into practice taking into account the peculiarity of the local and social contexts of two self-access language learning centres in northern Italy. Offering guidance and support for self-directed learning, opportunities for social interaction and integration are essential functions of the centres. After describing the centres creation and development context and their functioning, future projects aimed at developing learner awareness in families and schools are briefly outlined.

## **Introduction**

One of the issues that self-access language centres must address in order to promote self-directed learning competences is how to take into account the changing preferences of learners while maintaining the objective of autonomy in language learning.

The interest of the younger generations in concepts and ways of life such as self-made, DIY and self-reliance, which characterized the 1970s, has changed. In education, there has been a gradual shift in the conception of what (autonomous) learning means and how it can be promoted. Whereas in the 1970s emphasis was made on freedom of choice, which was possible through trust and curiosity, new generations of students prefer being guided or coached rather than, as Carl Rogers would have formulated, being helped to “discover, draw in from the outside, and make that which is drawn in a real part of [them]” (Rogers, 1969: 3). Jean Twenge’s work in the field of medical education on what she calls Generation Me (born in the 1970’s-1980’s) shows that

the decline in self-reliance apparent in these data and in anecdotal reports suggests that the current generation of students needs to be given structure and precise directions. They like to know exactly what they need to do to earn good grades and they become stressed when given ambiguous instructions. (Twenge, 2009: 403)

How can research on autonomy accompany this evolution? Do peer learning and social contexts for learning form a kind of response to this issue?

We seek to shed light on these questions by describing the development of a public self-access language learning centre (SALC onwards), unique to our knowledge. It is in itself an outstanding original structure which any researcher in autonomous learning might find fascinating.

Although or maybe because it was not established in a university context, it has evolved and is still evolving in line with not only research on autonomy, but also with the aspirations of a wide variety of learners. Describing this specificity is the aim of the article. After reminding some definitions, the historical conditions for the emergence of the SALC will be illustrated and its resources described. The training of advisors and the way the SALC is rethinking its function will then be developed.

## **1. Defining autonomy in a SALC**

A SALC is a learning environment which provides learners with various resources for language learning, in order to enhance both their language and their learning competencies in one or more languages (Morrison, 2008). SALCs may offer spaces for learning, for individuals and groups, equipped with computers, video stations, and a video or audio recording studio. In order to support learners in their learning process and to foster autonomy, SALCs may offer a language advising service, study guides, workshops and/or tutoring. SALCs may differ in the way they are structured, in the role they have within the institution, and in the resources they offer. Their structure and the educational support may strongly depend on the understanding of (learner) autonomy of their managers and staff. This is why it is advisable to start with a brief definition of autonomy.

Autonomy in language learning has been defined and described differently by several researchers (among others, Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981, 2009; Little, 1991, 2007; Littlewood, 1996; Oxford, 2003). Holec's definition, issued in the context of self-directed learning in adult education, identifies autonomy as the learner capacity to take responsibility for their own learning, thus defining learning objects, choosing materials and learning methods, making decisions about the learning pace and monitoring and evaluating both learning progress and the learning process (Holec, 1981: 4). Thus, autonomy is associated with the notion of independent action in the learning process. Independent action is possible if learners are capable of making informed and reflective decisions about their learning and allowed to do so in the institutional and social context in which they live and learn. Capacity, agency and a certain degree of freedom are therefore at the core of autonomy. Reflection and metacognition, as well as the capacity to interact and negotiate with others in the learning process, are essential to exercise autonomy to some extent (Little, 1991, 2001a, 2001b).

Autonomy is a metacapacity, a second-order capacity (Dworkin, 1988: 20), entailing various dimensions and components, such as a cognitive and metacognitive component (cognitive and metacognitive knowledge, awareness, learner's beliefs), an affective and motivational component (willingness, feelings, emotions), an action-oriented component (skills, learning behaviours, decisions) and a social component

(learning and negotiating learning with partners, teachers, advisors and other stakeholders). An essential characteristic of autonomy is the capacity of the learner to activate a balance among these dimensions as required and/or possible in the given learning contexts and situations (Tassinari, 2010: 124). Depending from the learning situation (classroom learning, self-directed learning, formal or informal learning), the control learners can exercise on the learning process may differ: for example, a learner who learns to pass a given language certificate will have the control on the learning rhythm and the learning methods, whereas the learning objectives are determined by the certificate itself. Since the capacity to control the whole learning process entails knowledge about the language and about language learning, learners usually need support at the beginning and often throughout the learning process, either through learning schemes and/or through language learning advising.

## **2. Developing autonomous learning in the SALCs of Bolzano and Merano**

Language learning schemes based on the autonomy approach to language pedagogy, the first of which was thought out and implemented at the CRAPEL, University of Nancy, France, back in 1972, can be described and compared in terms of two basic pedagogical rationales (Holec, 2009). On the one hand, some aim at developing *independent* learning, which is instructed learning with greater or lesser participation of learners in the decision-making process that underlies the definition, the carrying-out and the evaluation of teaching/learning programmes. In such schemes, trained teachers provide language instruction in a non-authoritarian way in face-to-face teaching settings, or tools for independent learning in distance-teaching settings, in order to encourage increasing learner involvement to develop learner independence “from teacher direction” (Pennycook, 1997, cited by Holec, 2009: 23). On the other hand, other schemes are aimed at developing *self-directed* learning, that is non-instructed learning which is neither guided nor controlled by teachers through their practice, and is not constrained by pre-constructed learning materials, and which is carried out by autonomous learners. In such schemes, learners are supported by language learning advisors and/or teachers with *self-directed* learning tools, such as study guides, learning strategies workshops, and/or individual advising sessions.

These tools can vary depending on contextual constraints. In the following, we will describe how two public SALCs were established and reflect on which factors contribute to foster learner autonomy and/or independent learning.

### **2.1. Understanding the social context**

The Multilingual Centre in Bolzano and the Multimedia Language Centre in Merano<sup>1</sup> are located in a trilingual province in the north of Italy and of South Tyrol. About 70% of the population of this region has German as native language; other 30% is made up by Italian and Ladin native speakers (Ladin around 3%). This percentage has historical reasons: until 1919 South Tyrol was an Austrian region. After World War 1 and the Peace Treaty with Austria (Saint-Germain-en-Laye) it was annexed to Italy. The following 20 years of Fascist government represented a painful period for the local population: German speakers were denied the right to use their own language in official situations, and the only language taught and spoken in schools was Italian. In the meantime, many Italians were sent from different regions of Italy to South Tyrol to “italianize” this Alpine province.

The years following World War 2 were characterized by a long, slow and difficult process of pacification, assured by the fact that South Tyrol was guaranteed a special autonomy from the central government in Rome. Since 1972, in order to be hired in a public office, it is necessary to obtain a certificate attesting the knowledge of the two major languages (German and Italian), as well as Ladin for the areas where Ladin is spoken.

Nowadays, each linguistic group is specifically catered to through provincial departments dedicated to promoting the culture and language heritage of each group. School teaching in each native language is also guaranteed, and the second language is taught in schools from the very first year. In addition, some schools are implementing or testing a trilingual system, where subjects are taught in the two or three languages.

Within this context, during the 1970s the Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen set up an Office aimed at supporting in particular Italian-speaking population to learn German as a second language. The Office for Bilingualism and Foreign Languages supported first and foremost school teachers, but later on also

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<sup>1</sup> [www.provincia.bz.it/languages](http://www.provincia.bz.it/languages)

families and private citizens. In the very first years of its existence, the Office bought and created materials for class activities, organized training and language courses, and finally set up the Multilingual Centre in Bolzano.

The Multilingual Centre started in the 1980s as a support centre to provide language teachers with materials for their teaching activity. About 10 years later, this role was taken over by pedagogical institutions. Therefore, the Multilingual Centre changed its mission towards private citizens' needs, thus becoming the first public self-access language centre in Italy. Since South Tyrol is a province with two official languages and it is compulsory for local governmental employees to obtain a recognized language certificate of bilingualism, language learning is a life-long issue, extending far beyond the school context. That is the reason why the centres are faced with a wide range of learners with very different cultural and social backgrounds and different objectives: learning the two provincial languages for professional reasons; maintaining their native language (migrants); early language learning; language certificates; tourism, passion; etc. This variety of learning goals represents every day a big challenge.

In 2002, the Multimedia Language Centre in Merano was established, a self-access centre since its very first day. This fact is very closely linked to the understanding of learning by decision-makers, especially Daniela Zambaldi, the current director of the two SALCs. She has developed a significant culture regarding the concept of autonomy, by reading and making available for the public on a dedicated library shelf a considerable amount of journals and books published by authors such as Holec (1981) Little (1991), Benson (2011), Carette & Castillo (2004), Gremmo & Castillo (2006), Everhard (2012) and Tassinari (2010). She got convinced that a successful setting up of Self Directed Learning schemes in institutionalised language learning environments relies heavily, if not totally, on the actors' ability to introduce such an innovation into the existing institutional system, besides obviously relying on their willingness to do so. Moreover, introducing an innovation in a pre-existing system is a process that requires thought, planning, evaluation and tracking/monitoring over time, and thus cannot be left to enthusiastic inspiration. Setting up appropriate resources and training of all actors are a necessity.

## **2.2. Organizing material resources**

In a self-directed learning scheme, resources are central.

Research has shown that learning materials should be accessible, adaptable and self-sufficient (Carette & Holec, 1995). The centres' resources are divided into language sections. The major sections are German, English, Italian, French, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Arabic and Chinese; an additional 20 languages are available in the 'world section'. Resources are essentially classified by contents : general language courses , grammar books and dictionaries, texts to exercise reading and listening comprehension, as well as writing and speaking competences, specialised language resources, material for the preparation of language certificates, literary texts and audio books, including simplified versions, games and videogames, as well as comics and films in the original language. For the majority of the sections it is possible to find different types of supports: books, magazines, CDs, DVDs, etc.

A kids' corner is dedicated to children between 0-10 years, with books, audio books, songs and animated cartoons on offer. In the major languages, teens can find narrative books.

A specialised section focuses on multilingualism, intercultural education, didactics and early acquisition of a second and subsequent languages; this section also includes a collection of degree and doctorate theses on multilingualism.

Online resources are filtered, regularly checked, and classified according to language and content, in order to help learners to deal autonomously with them. Online resources represent an important part of the resources suggested for language learning, as many of them are free and can be easily accessed everywhere, not only in or through SALCs. Beyond that, they turn out to be very interesting for people who cannot access loan services, because lacking regular identity documents.

### **2.3. Training language learning advisors**

Favourable factors in the context do not ensure the feasibility of self-directed learning. For self-directed learning to actually take place, of course, other conditions have to be satisfied, the first of which being that there should be learners willing to learn a particular language (general motivational issue) and willing to engage in self-directed learning. Experience shows that, for various reasons (for one possible explanation, see the arguments of the self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan,

1985), learners are usually highly motivated in favour of this mode of learning *after* they have discovered its principles and have been able to experiment it. Experience also shows, however, that the learners' motivation stands in direct relation to their advisors' own attitude and motivation towards self-directed learning, so that advisors contribute greatly to learners' potential increase or lack of motivation for learning to learn (Carette, 2012). It also has been shown that the way advisors express their own emotions seems to affect the learners' emotions. Carette, Meléndez-Quero and Thiébaud (2013) conducted a statistical study that suggests that the advisor tends to express emotions in such a way as to bring the tone of interaction towards neutrality. When a learner's emotional state is positive, the correlated state of the advisor tends towards neutral and when the learner's state is negative, the advisor's correlated state is positive. It seems that this phenomenon of contagion might explain emotional changes that have been observed in series of advising sessions. The ways in which the advisor supports the learner's motivational state have yet to be studied to determine the impact on learning, including by observing the evolution of the learner's methodology. Although, it seems very clear that the human resource is central for this process.

Changing the advisors' negative attitudes and representations should then be, and is, one of the objectives of their training.

Thus, efforts were made to train the personnel of the two centres, including learning advisors of course, but also the reception personnel. Several researchers in the field of autonomy were invited in 2006, 2008-2009, 2014, and 2017 to improve personnel training, in order to ensure that:

- (i) staff members and particularly advisors would be able to support learners throughout the learning process in the various phases of their self-directed learning programmes;
- (ii) learners would more likely be able to self-direct learning programmes of their own;
- (iii) learners would be given real opportunities to use their learning ability and to learn individually or collectively in a self-directed way.

The centres offer face-to-face learning advising sessions to all centres' users to support autonomous language learning. The purpose of the advising sessions is to support the learner and promote autonomy following Holec's principals, helping

her/him to plan, implement and evaluate a study programme, taking into account his/her personal objectives and needs (Holec, 1981).

The advising session takes place on an individual basis and is free of charge. A reservation needs to be made and a session can be booked four times a year. Each session lasts 30 minutes.

The promotion of self-directed learning is therefore well established in the two SALCs. However, the SALCs are evolving to respond to another contextual factor.

### **3. Recent development: Promoting social learning opportunities**

Educators have experienced a change in their students' attitudes towards work and study, a change in their preferred ways of learning, in their lifestyles. This phenomenon can be generalized by saying that a shift of values from being free to being coached and cared for has taken place in Western societies. Jean Twenge's work is instructive on this point: using a cross-temporal meta-analysis, she shows that American and probably most western countries' younger generations tend to be overconfident, to have a sense that the world owes them something, are smarter but dislike reading long texts. As a result, the way most learners think about how to learn a language has changed, compared to that of the 1970's or of the 1980's. Most of them no longer want to cope by themselves with learning issues, rather they come to the SALCs as they would go a social club. Indeed, a new function of SALCs, is, as Mynard puts it, to provide learners with a meeting point and support for learning, thus being, "social hubs where students naturally come for social, emotional, and learning support" (Mynard, 2016: 334). The SALCs in Bolzano and Merano have followed this evolution providing more opportunities for social learning within and beyond the SALCs themselves. Thus, peer-to-peer learning opportunities have gained importance. *Cinema and languages*, *Voluntariat per les llengües*, *Language Café* and *The English Conversation Club*, represent long-established but also growing informal and non-formal learning opportunities and settings.

*Cinema and languages* presents films in the original language screened with subtitles in that language. Each film is introduced by a native speaker who also distributes a glossary of key terms and phrases from the film. After the film, visitors can stay and discuss their impressions with other viewers in the same language as that of the film.

*Voluntariat per les llengües* is a language volunteer project aimed at learners with basic knowledge of German or Italian who need to acquire greater fluency and confidence in speaking this language for daily use and social purposes. The volunteers are German or Italian native speakers who have a desire to share their language in an easy and informal manner and to spend a few hours talking with a learner and meeting new people.

*Language Café* offers opportunity to enjoy a pleasant and informal conversation in German, English, Spanish, French, Italian, but also Arabic and Ladin, just as if learners were sitting in a café with friends. Learners choose the language they prefer: with the help of a native speaker moderator, a different language will be spoken at every 'conversation table' and learners can easily move from one language to another.

Finally, *English Conversation Club* is a lunch-time conversation practice in a relaxed atmosphere.

These learning settings, which are to be found not only in SALCs but also in their surroundings, have two relevant characteristics: they base on a high level of social contact, and they are valuable and meaningful experiences *per se*, not only as means for developing language competences. These two aspects are obviously deeply connected: taking part in an interesting and stimulating event, such as watching a movie or drinking a cup of coffee together with other people sharing the same interest, makes it an opportunity to be part of a social situation (Murray & Fujishima, 2016).

As Deci and Flaste (1995) point out, social contact is an extremely strong factor for promoting extrinsic motivation and thus strengthening intrinsic motivation, which is the engine of autonomous learning. Thus autonomous language learning is finally perceived as an experience to share with other people, and no longer as an individual, solitary undertaking to deal with on your own (as often misunderstood when people first hear about "autonomy" in language learning).

In line with recent developments in the field of self-access language learning, the two SALCs in Bolzano and Merano rethink their function by providing opportunities to constitute learning communities through learners' interaction (Mynard, 2012) and by potentiating learner support, establishing a balance between materials and human resources, cognitive and affective factors, as well as external and inner resources for language learning (Murray, 2011).

The learners at the SALCs do extremely appreciate these opportunities. Many of them are not used to self-directed learning and are convinced that the only way to learn a language is through a traditional course. Therefore, they are happy to extend their language competence in an entertaining manner. In all these cases, the idea to spend some time with other people using the target language is more than welcomed. This feeling of well-being positively influences the learners' attitude towards language learning.

Still, it remains that a learner who learns through social contact without learning to learn, who does not exactly know what he or she is learning, is not a fully autonomous learner. Probably the SALCs have had to adapt to new expectations from the learners; by focusing on well-being and social interaction, they take into account aspects which are crucial to autonomous learning, but, in doing so, they probably leave less room to learning to learn and reflection on the learning process, which are as well core aspects of learner autonomy. The Multilingual Centre of Bolzano and the Multimedia Language Centre of Merano are eager to prevent people from thinking that learning autonomously means to learn on their own, isolated. Thus, they try and promote three types of dialogue for the learners (Tassinari, 2010; Little, 2001a, 2001b):

1. A dialogue with themselves, in order to identify their needs, their abilities and, consequently, the resources and the learning path they may decide to start following. Being in contact with oneself also means to feel and recognize the feelings linked to language learning. This internal dialogue is a first step to develop self-awareness and reflection on the learning process and is usually initiated / enhanced by taking part in language learning advising sessions.
2. A dialogue with other learners (peer-to-peer), in order to use conversation opportunities, but also to enjoy an event related to their own interests and enjoy being with other learners (motivation increase).
3. A dialogue with the surroundings, so that learners become aware of and linked to the environment they live in. This is particularly relevant for migrants, for whom SALCs are often the starting point both for language learning and for social integration.

Dialogue clearly stays at the opposite end of isolation. Being able to speak and listen to oneself is the first step towards autonomy in language learning, and, even

more, towards autonomy as a competence for life (cf. Mozzon-McPherson, 2012; Karlsson, 2017).

Opening, activating and fostering a dialogue with other learners and with the world around means recognizing the plurality of learners, of learners' histories, but also the plurality of needs, goals, and abilities inside the learner.

#### **4. Looking forward: Next steps**

As language learning is more and more possible in everyday life, in social contexts, and not only in SALCs, the two SALCs aim at developing awareness for autonomous learning out of the SALCs, i.e. in families and schools.

As for families, early language acquisition has always been a central issue for the Office for Bilingualism and Foreign Languages. An animated cartoon has been produced together with the University La Sapienza in Rome, in order to support in a family context the language acquisition method "Hocus and Lotus" (Taeschner, 2005), implemented in kindergartens, primary schools and playgroups.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years many parents and grand-parents asked SALC members for advice related to language promotion in early age. Some of them were part of a bilingual family, some of them were migrant families, others simply sought the opportunity to offer their children an early approach to the second language or to another language.

It is planned to offer face-to-face advising sessions and peer-to-peer monthly encounters for parents, grand-parents and educators interested in early language acquisition outside the classroom.

The individual advising encounters will focus on the particular language situation of the family, on its history and environment, trying to make the concerned adults aware of the starting situation, of their conscious and unconscious expectations, and of the emotional family atmosphere linked to foreign cultures and language learning. An overview on in-house and online resources, as well as on the resources available in the region will be offered, encouraging the adults to try and test the different possibilities according to their interests and to the interests of their children. It is also significant to remind parents, grand-parents and educators that the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.provincia.bz.it/formazione-lingue/languages/hocus-lotus-the-dinocrocs-who-teach-languages-to-children.asp>

best lesson they can give is the example they offer: a positive attitude towards the other language, the curiosity to know more about it, and in general openness towards other cultures are the best basis kids can receive for language learning.

The peer-to-peer monthly meetings will offer interested persons the opportunity to exchange, in an informal situation, their minds, their doubts, and their good practices in introducing and cultivating a second/foreign language at home. Thus, autonomy can be experienced as a social issue, as a group undertaking, which actually meets with the pedagogical mission of society. There would be greater convergence between society and educational and vocational institutions if all or most of them invested the idea of autonomy and agency in learning.

Drawing the attention to schools, regular contacts between primary, middle and high schools and the Bolzano and Merano SALCs have always taken place. School classes occasionally come for guided tours, in order to discover, through language games and activities, what a SALC is, how it works, and what it offers.

It is planned to develop this concept from a mere guided tour and resources presentation, to an occasion for high-school students to reflect on their perception and their idea of the second language, but also on their emotions towards it.

This project will require teachers' cooperation, as pupils will have to write a short autobiographical text representing their relation to the second language, in terms of present emotions, expectations, fears, open questions, curiosities, difficulties, or/and in terms of past experiences. However, this work should not be considered as a classwork to be corrected and marked by the teacher. On the contrary, it should be clear to pupils that the SALC and all activities offered there aim to learn a language in a relaxed atmosphere, taking into account their attitudes, interests, past experiences, without any kind of external evaluation.

After having completed this experience, the SALC will ask pupils and teachers the permission to receive the anonymous texts and analyse them in order to identify core elements of the learners' reflection and use it for other classes coming to visit the SALC. Thus, the importance of learner's biography and of emotions in (language) learning will be highlighted. An introduction to the SALC will be also given, and a definition of the concept of autonomy will be sought and constructed together.

In addition, teachers will be encouraged to ask their pupils one month after their visit to reflect on what has changed since their visit to the SALC, in order to promote a further reflection on their experience, beliefs and attitudes towards

language learning. Draft guidelines for high-school students guided tours to the Multilingual Centre and the Multimedia Language Centre have been designed and will be handed out to teachers.

In this way, the two SALCs hope to receive a feedback from teachers and learners, from which useful indications will be drawn to improve this project and keep promoting autonomy in the SALCs and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

Fostering autonomy in a public SALC is a motivating and challenging experience. In this paper, the authors reflected on how insights from the literatures can be put into practice taking into account the peculiarity of the local and social contexts. Offering guidance and support for self-directed learning, opportunities for social interaction and integration are essential functions of the centres. To this purpose, staff development needs to be planned and pursued on a regular basis. As a public centre, it is also crucial to open opportunities for reflection to the whole society, both in educational contexts, opening a dialogue with teachers and schools, and beyond educational contexts, in families and social networks.

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