

# Learner Autonomy in Modern Language Learning

## Find your bearing and pick your way

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### Introduction

This presentation is about how, as a lecturer of language students I have tried to guide them to find their own preferred ways of study in a context of learner autonomy. Teachers in Malta undergo their initial training by reading for a four year B.Ed. (Hons.) degree or a one year postgraduate certificate in education P.G.C.E.) at the University of Malta. As part of the course requirements they must follow a specified number of courses, which we call 'units' each of which consists of a fixed number of lectures and tutorials amounting to 14 hours. Each student is assessed at the end of each unit by test or written assignment. I offer a unit on learner autonomy, and what I describe here was undertaken by B.Ed. students on a voluntary basis.

I have been offering this unit for a number of years now, but this was the first time that it was offered as a choice and not as a required course. The unit has two aims. The immediate aim is 'the development of student-teachers' autonomy as learners' since they come with little background of autonomous learning. The long-term aim is 'the development of learner autonomy in the classroom'.

I normally start the unit by introducing the concept of 'learner autonomy' on a theoretical level and then slowly give students more and more opportunity to identify one or more learning needs, and to choose their own method of study, to decide on an assignment, project or oral presentation as required at the end of every unit. I also guide them to evaluate their own performance and accept the grade they give themselves. With every group of students I found that learner autonomy improves learning and student motivation IF it is introduced slowly, and the students are prepared for it as a new approach, and willing to try it out. I like to emphasise that learner autonomy is a social process in the sense that interaction with colleagues and others is essential. The affective aspect plays a central role. Learner autonomy is important because it encourages each learner to find their own way of learning.

However, I also keep noticing that learners need a lot of guidance first of all to be able to identify their learning needs, and also to find the method that best suits them.

Having come to the realization that as someone who wanted to promote autonomous learning I needed to find more and better means of **guiding** learners to find their own learning routes, I was intrigued by the theory of learning styles. I felt that students needed a learning environment that helped them identify their own needs and specify their own learning objectives. In order to do this effectively, and to benefit to the utmost from their course of study, they needed to know what sort of language learners they

were in order for them to establish their own personal learning programme (even if they worked in groups).

I observed how students learn differently from each other, how their performance is related to how each individual does, in fact, learn, and that when students are taught through the methods each prefers, they learn more effectively

However, I lacked *systematic ways to identify individual preferences for learning and hence to be able to make suggestions to students with varying learning styles develop on the basis of individual diagnosis.*

At this point I'd like to clarify that my research does not fall within the area of learning or teaching style research. My concern is not how to improve teaching styles, or to find out to what extent teaching styles that match learning styles will get students to obtain better results. It has arisen from the need to help students identify their own needs, and find their own learning paths. It is based on action research, qualitative in nature, and its validity weighed according to any improvement it brings in the life of individual students. For instance, at the end of each unit, student teachers have reported back that what they found most useful was the opportunity to develop a line of communication with the tutor. What follows is about how this line of communication has been enhanced, has brought understanding, and gave a bearing and lit the path for participants.

### **The Learning Combination Inventory**

I slowly started to discover that there are ways of helping students discover their learning styles through Christine Johnston's Learning Combination Inventory (LCI). I became familiar with the LCI during a week's Summer Institute at Rowan University, New Jersey, in June last year. I would like to say that I was particularly attracted to it because it is not simply another test, questionnaire or inventory that one takes to place oneself in a category or on a point of a continuum (for more on learning styles see Reid ed. 1995). It is about a process. It involves the teacher in action research. The LCI is a means by which the teacher and the learner in coming to appreciate each other's teaching/learning style. The teacher is naturally responsible for understanding and accepting the student's own learning pattern so that she is able to give more varied opportunity for learning. At the same time she will know what kind of effort the learner has to do when expected to perform within a learning pattern that he does not normally prefer.

The LCI is based on the Interactive Learning Model (Johnston 1996, 1998), which reflects an interaction of cognition (information processing), conation (the action-behaviour centre), and affectation (self-esteem and self-confidence).

Johnston (1996:38) describes it in this way:

*"The first thing to recognize is that the interactive process does not occur on a random basis. It occurs as a pattern of behaviors. These behaviors are formed from the combination of our cognitive, conative, and affective tendencies. These tendencies converge to form the basis of our thought processes, mode of action, and feelings about ourselves. This convergence also forms our patterns of learning behavior."*

The Interactive Learning Model reveals itself in the form of 4 discrete patterns:

The **sequential** portion of our interactive learning patterns causes us to perform a learning task by following a plan. This aspect of the learner seeks to follow step-by-step **directions**; organise and plan work carefully; and complete the assignment from beginning to end with as few interruptions as possible.

The **precise** portion of our interactive learning patterns causes us to seek detailed information and to process information carefully and accurately. The learner listens to the teacher and takes detailed notes; asks questions to find out more; knows exact answers; and reads and writes using detailed information.

The **technical** portion of our interactive learning patterns has us feel success when given the opportunity to work out autonomously, 'hands on', unencumbered by paper and pencil requirements. The learner uses technical reasoning to figure out how to do things; works alone without interference; displays knowledge by physically demonstrating skills; and learns best from real world experiences.

The **confluent** portion of our interactive learning patterns precipitates our avoidance of conventional approaches and, instead, embraces unique ways of completing any learning task. This part of our patterns gives us permission to take a risk, fail and start again; use imaginative ideas and unusual ideas and improvise.

**Having embarked on a journey of discovery of these interactive learning patterns, I wanted to find out whether I could apply it more specifically to language learning.**

I started to suspect that learners who would normally use a particular pattern first, would correspondingly prefer to study language in certain ways and not others, as follows:

Sequential processors	The need to work through meticulous grammatical exercises.
Precise processors	The need to look for the right words and expressions trying hard to avoid mistakes.
Technical processors	Emphasize the technical detail of language such as pronunciation and intonation.
Confluent processors	Like to practise language in conversation with native speakers.

### **The Experiment**

I worked with a group of student teachers between January and April 1999. After an unsuccessful call for volunteers in October 1998, shortly after the beginning of the academic year, I decided, in January 1999, to ask each subject co-ordinator in my

department to schedule an hour for me during which I could meet the students and explain my project. In this way, during the first week in February I held four 1 hour meetings with students taking German, Spanish, Italian and French.

At this meeting I gave some brief information about the Learning Combination Inventory, asked them to fill it in, and to then introspect a little bit and write their thoughts on a sheet of paper on:

*What do I think about myself?*

*What do others say about me?*

*What kind of learner am I?*

*What kind of language learner am I?*

Then I explained that those who were interested in discovering more about themselves, and about learning styles, could volunteer to meet me regularly every fortnight, to keep a learning diary, and to reflect on their language learning process. Thirty-four students filled in the LCI, and nineteen of them volunteered to participate more fully.

I did not work with all nineteen students to the same extent. With the students taking German and Spanish I had a few meetings to discuss their LCI scores, had general discussions about their learning experiences, kept a journal but they did not keep a diary. With five first year students taking French, and five second year students taking Italian I had continual communication not only in plenary but also on an individual basis. Below I talk in some detail about five of them.

The aim of the project could be described as "an exploration into the students' learning style (using the LCI) combined with their reflections on language learning, to try to identify corresponding patterns between learning patterns and language learning preferences".

Two major difficulties were encountered. The first was that at the time they worked with me they were required to do very little 'conscious' language learning, as the focus was more on literature, linguistics, and teaching methodology.

The second major problem was that students had never before been asked to either reflect on their learning, or to keep a reflective journal, and therefore found it difficult to get used to the idea, and as one of them said, "to put my thoughts into words". (*"I find it difficult to write-up my thoughts & what actually happens. I am afraid that I am thinking does not reflect in what I write. That's why I stay back from writing my thoughts. Just right now I do not feel like writing, even though I feel like talking to someone, thus sharing my problems with him. In this period I'm passing through a difficult time. I'm feeling a bit confused. I just want to cry."* Elena 25.3.99). This reflection was written in pen after an entry in pencil on the same page. I will come back to this case.

The most successful aspects of the project were:

- Almost all participants reported that as a result they felt their self-esteem rise and experienced an improvement in their self-confidence, not only as learners, but as people;
- They came to a better understanding of themselves and of their peers, and as a

result felt better able to offer help, and also felt better prepared to face a classroom of different individuals;

- Felt better able to take necessary decisions relating to their career.

I shall now turn to a small sample of participants, refer to their LCI results, and to their diary entries. I would like to emphasize that the most rewarding aspect of this work for me, and also for the students, was that they came to a better understanding of themselves, not only as students, but as individuals; they appreciated having a member of staff interested in them as people with their own personalities; and the fact that in the end we learned a lot more about how they came to be student teachers and how this was effecting their motivation. In one special case, that of Elena, it lead to a major decision in the choice of subject. Let me take each case at a time.

### Vanessa

French. First year student.

LCI score: Sequential 34, Precise 31, Technical 20, Confluent 16.

The fact that Vanessa prefers a highly sequential pattern is very evident in her diary. The very first entry (on 11.2.99) states

*"As far as I can remember, I always had a timetable in which I write everything that I plan to do. Without a timetable I end up wanting to do a lot of things in one day and then at the end do nothing at all".*

Similarly, her very last entry (on 16.4.99) in reply to my question on she's learned in this project, says:

*"It has enabled me to understand myself and the way I learn more. I now know the reason why I do certain things in certain ways, eg. the need for me to have a study time-table or otherwise I will feel lost".*

As someone who is highly sequential and precise, Vanessa's normal practice is the usual one of "*grouping all the information... read the chater and then write the notes*". In one of her diary entries dated 5.4.99, she explains her frustrations:

*"...by the end of the day I had only covered one book and had not even looked at the newspapers and the other information. This meant that I was going to fall behind in my timetable and I was very frustrated".*

### Maria

French, First year.

LCI score: Sequential 33, Precise 24, Technical 25, Confluent 19.

Like Vanessa, in her first diary entry, in answer to my question "What do others say about you?", she wrote:

*"I like to be precise, perfect and tidy in my own things, e.g. I don't want a dog-eared page or a line not straight or a word crossed out with a pen".*

For each diary entry Maria started a fresh page, and on each and every page she used bullets. This has made her diary look like one list of idea after another. On the 26.3.99 she admitted that:

*"This pattern (the sequential) expresses well what type of language student I am. I want clear directions which I usually follow step by step. I organize and plan work carefully, and I like to end a task when I begin it without interruptions... Whatever I do, I always plan it before... I am very angry when I skip an instruction.*

### **The precise pattern.**

Yes, I do want information as much as possible and I need the right one. With detailed information I can process carefully and I am convinced of what I am doing. I like to take detailed notes... Generally the teacher will just beat around the bush, rather than give you an accurate answer... When this happens I become frustrated."

Etienne

Italian, second year.

LCI pattern: Sequential 32, Precise 22, Technical 15, Confluent 23.

Etienne was immediately labelled 'sequential' by his peers from the very first contact with the LCI. After comparing each of their scores, Irene told the class about Etienne "He nearly killed me when the sequence of lectures for a particular course was changed" ("Dan qatilni daqskemm ghamel ghageb meta bidlulna s-sekwenza tal-lectures").

When asked to comment about his preferred course, he dedicated a page to "glottodidattica". He explained:

*"This consists in a series of lessons during which we learn how to help school students approach grammar through the use of 'authentic' texts that interest them. In these lessons we analyze a text and develop exercises that could be used with learners ..."*

-- Etienne 30.4

*"Dawn jikkonsistu f'lezzjonijiet li jindikawlna modi ta' kif inressqu l-grammatika lejn l-istudenti bi sfond ta' 'texts' attwali li ghandhom jinteressaw lit-tfal. Fil-lezzjonijiet ahna nanalizzaw 'text' u nohorgu diversi 'exercises' li nistghu nuzaw mat-tfal..."*

-- Etienne 30.4

Soon after, he also wrote as the last entry in his diary:

*"In terms of learning, I think that the best I have found to work with were:*

- *the internet*
- *various books from the library*
- *and the reading of novels"*

-- Etienne 1.5

*"Bhala taghlim nahseb li ghal dan ix-xoghol, l-ahjar li sibt kienu:*

- *l-internet*
- *kotba varji mil-librerija*
- *u l-qari ta' novelli"*

-- Etienne 1.5

Etienne stated early on in his diary that he "wants everything in its sequence, one step after another. I learn most of the time by heart...and I think that I can learn only by reading the packs given to us" (18.02). I noticed that he used to take down detailed notes during my meetings with him and his peers, making sure that he has all the information to follow 'my directions' with regard to diary keeping etc. – typical of highly sequential people.

An interesting event in the case of Etienne was that he asked for an extra copy of the LCI to give to his girlfriend. He admitted that they were having too many disagreements lately, about everything, but especially about how to go about doing things, and he was now convinced that this is because they have a different learning profile. While he was mainly sequential, he was convinced that she was mainly technical (also being the only lady studying technical subjects in her group). In the diary he wrote: "I feel that others don't understand me, especially my girlfriend". I gave him a copy for her and he reported that in fact she scored high on all four processes and was therefore a 'strong-willed learner'. He did not, however, mention this incident again.

### Elena

Italian, second year

LCI score: sequential 12, precise 23, technical 33, confluent 17.

Elena was an interesting participant, especially from my point of view, since she has a learning pattern that is quite different from mine. Being a sequential person myself, I found it a bit difficult to cope with Elena who simply seemed always reluctant to follow my directions! I was sure that she was willing to participate and collaborate, but in her own way. We worked hard in getting to know each other, and Elena after a period of self-discovery, in the end, came to an important decision regarding her career. Listen to her own self:

"I am a person that is always angry at herself. Even though I am willing to do various things, I never fulfill them...the fact that I want to do things perfectly leads me to take a long time before I start really doing them, and often I leave them incomplete" (precise but not sequential) (5.2)

"I prefer doing things in practice rather than writing long essays. I like to be creative in my technical inventions. My way of learning is very technical and also precise. In fact the thing that always causes me to leave things to be done is because I want to do them precisely, but I am not sequential to find the time to accomplish my work. I am always trying to start planning my work so that I feel more calm and happy but it is very difficult for me...that's why I feel angry about myself" (5.2)

During a counselling session that I specifically asked for, it came out that that Elena had been given the wrong advice as to which career to choose. She had always known that she performed better in Mathematics, a subject she liked and that she wanted to excel in. For some reason, the school counsellor had advised her against such a choice, and so she went in for Italian. She continually felt frustrated because although she liked to speak the language with its native speakers, she was very unhappy about the course itself. Furthermore, she reported that during her first teaching practice at primary school, she dedicated a lot of time and energy to the teaching of mathematics, to the detriment of language subjects. This brought her to the realization that she is in the wrong track, and luckily was still on time to move to the primary track, although she could not become a maths specialist at this stage. In April she wrote:

"Thanks to this learning style research now I know what I am, what I want, and in which way I have to achieve it. I am going to choose primary teaching instead of Italian. I cannot imagine myself teaching a language. During my teaching practice I really enjoyed teaching maths and science, inventing interesting and motivating methods...I am always feeling not in the right place because I had to choose Maths."

At our first meeting Elena was described by her friend as a 'confused person' ('imhawda'). Eventually it transpired that her confusion was the result of having decided to follow a course which did not suit her learning style and this made her continuously frustrated and guilty. She wrote in her diary: "I prefer doing things in practice than writing long essays. I like to be creative in my technical inventions". Luckily she was on time to remedy the situation partially, although she still felt that after her degree she might start all over again with Maths!

### Robert

Italian, second year

LCI score: sequential 17, precise 23, technical 30, confluent 28

Robert avoids sequential processing. He says he "lacks any kind of organisation regarding any item...I never follow an agenda...I believe this is the joy of life". He likes to consider himself as being "original" and always tried "to invent my own idea about something. For the Italian assignment I chose a title no one else chose". Robert likes to be different.

He, in fact, presented the most interesting, varied and colourful diary. Each page had a different design and colour, and was decorated with photographs depicting him in his bedroom, most of the time working on his 'art and crafts', or 'simply doing nothing'!

He is happy about himself. The very first sentence in his diary was "Thinking about myself is rather enjoyable" (5.2). Towards the end he admitted "Thank God I am confluent. In my opinion being confluent enhances your enjoyment in life. I believe...the world is in our hands and we can change it...we should not do it on a pattern or copy – So get up and change your environment!" (n/d).

Robert did badly in exams, especially when he was at school, and this resulted in a poor self-image for some time. According to him he did badly since exams are based on memory work and he hates studying by heart. In fact his "most fruitful language learning activity was the oral exam for Advanced level", and at university "during a

tutorial when we had an informal dialogue it was very interesting" (18.2). He offers some advice to lecturers and suggests that instead of giving the same task to all students they should give a different exercise to each student: "Even lecturers themselves would find it more pleasant to correct fifteen different translations"!

With regard to my original hypothesis I feel I can talk about trends that I noticed, which are, of course, in no way conclusive given such a small sample. I noticed that:

Those whose preferred pattern is sequential and/or precise but not technical and/or confluent prefer **written** to oral work

"I learn better through writing rather than hearing only".

-- Vanessa p.3

"I prefer that the teacher gives us detailed notes covering all possibilities and then we study them. After studying I prefer to apply what I have studied by doing some exercises in order to test my knowledge".

-- Vanessa p.4

"I can learn only by reading the packs given to us."

-- Etienne 18.2

Enjoy working on grammatical exercises, looking for and understanding language patterns

"...I conjugated each verb in all the tenses and then checked for corrections..."

-- Vanessa 30.3

"However I was quite disappointed to find that there are still more stumbling blocks. I referred to another grammar book in which the explanation is put in very simple terms. I do not seem to be able to decipher any pattern or rule. I still have the difficulty and it makes me feel uncomfortable..."

-- Vanessa 31.3

"(I think I learn by studying) glottodidattica/grammar"

-- Etienne 18.3

**Those whose preferred pattern is technical and/or confluent but not sequential and/or precise**

Prefer to **speak** rather than to write. They like to participate.

"We did spontaneous translations...from English to Italian. I felt I did very well...hearing the Italian language being spoken by a native always helps me more than ever to think more in Italian..."

-- Irene 18.2

"I don't learn much from one-sided teaching lessons"

;

-- Irene 26.2

"I love to attend seminars/talks/forums etc."

-- Irene 7.3

"The best way I learn is going abroad and being motivated to use a foreign language in the practical way"

-- Elena 5.2

"My most fruitful language learning activity was during the oral exam of the A level...an activity that provides for self-interests really does work"

-- Robert 11.2

"It is more important, I believe, that you know how to speak a language, than knowing grammatical tenses"

-- Robert 18.2

Dislike study and preparing for exams.

"I always tend to leave everything to be done at the end, especially in doing an assignment"

-- Elena 5.2

" I started to study on the day of the exam."

-- Elena n/d

"I am dead calm...I don't have all university files and notes classified, not up-to-date...I affirm my hatred towards exams. I like practical

assignments"

-- Robert n/d

### **Conclusion**

After admitting that the sample used here was very small, and after having eliminated strong-willed learners, I would still like to draw some conclusions. These are by no means intended as generalizations, but as stepping stones for further research. Another important proviso is that, as it happens, the learners identified above happen to prefer either both sequential **and** precise processing, or technical **and** confluent processing. In my conclusion below I only refer to that which is specific to language learning, and not to learning generally.

- Learners who prefer sequential and precise processing feel happier (like they are where they belong) about their language learning than those who prefer technical and confluent processing.
- Learners who prefer sequential and precise processing like to study grammar, and prefer written to oral work.
- Learners who prefer technical and confluent processing feel unsure about their choice of career as language teachers.
- Learners who prefer technical and confluent processing like oracy best as part of their language learning and dislike preparing for written work, especially examinations.

A facile inference from this could be that technical and confluent processors are not ideal language students. Or would it be more accurate to say that the methods being used in language teaching are not suitable or attractive enough to technical and confluent processors?

I feel that this project was worth it for the simple reason that at least one student had come to understand her frustration and was able to remedy her situation. Following Professor Christine Johnston's motto, working with the LCI is about **Making a Difference, Each Day, All Year, One Student at a Time**

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