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A Dynamic Model for Autonomy: Self-Assessment as Reflection

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Self-assessment, as the independent judgment of the learner on their own competencies or achievements, ideally based upon self-determined criteria (Kleppin, 2005, p. 107), aims at raising the learner's awareness of their strengths and progress within the language learning process and is therefore crucial in autonomization processes. Beside self-assessment of language proficiency, self-assessment of learning competences and competences for autonomy should be integrated into the language learning process. However, since autonomy is a complex and fluctuating construct, it is advisable to encourage self-assessment with qualitative and dynamic tools which allow learners to reflect on their competences and goals at different times of the learning process and with different focuses. The dynamic model for autonomy (Tassinari, 2010, 2015) was conceived to describe autonomy in its complexity and to support reflection. In this contribution, I will briefly describe the dynamic model and illustrate a procedure for self-assessment and reflection in self-directed learning contexts.

The Dynamic Model for Autonomy

The dynamic model for autonomy is based on a definition of autonomy as a complex construct of learner competences, as the metacapacity of the learner to control and self-direct their own learning in different ways according to their needs and to the situation. As a multidimensional construct, autonomy entails following components:

- a cognitive and metacognitive component (cognitive and metacognitive knowledge, awareness, learners' beliefs, represented in the model as 'structuring knowledge');
- an affective component (feelings, emotions, represented in the model as 'dealing with my feelings')
- a motivational component (willingness, motivation, represented in the model as 'motivating myself');

- an action-oriented component (skills, learning behaviors, decisions, represented in the model as ‘planning’, ‘choosing materials and methods’, ‘completing tasks’, ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluating’);
- a social component (learning and negotiating learning with partners, advisors, teachers, within and outside the institutional context, represented in the model as ‘cooperating’);
- a metastrategic component (the capacity to orchestrate all components, represented in the model as ‘managing my learning’) (Tassinari, 2010, pp. 124–126).

As shown in Figure 1, the dynamic model (www.sprachenzentrum.fu-berlin.de/slz/index.html) takes the form of a sphere and entails all these dimensions, closely intertwined, as shown by the arrows connecting them. Although all these components closely interact with each other in the autonomous language learning process, having these distinctions among them is useful to both learners and teachers or advisors, as actors of the learning and supporting process, so that they can better reflect on different competences, skills and strategies according to their needs and use opportunities that present themselves in the language learning context to improve and enhance them.

Figure 1. The Dynamic Model for Autonomy (Tassinari, 2010)

The descriptors

Each component of the dynamic model has a set of descriptors, with specific statements about competencies, skills and behaviors, formulated as can-do statements (for example, ‘I can organize a time and a place for my learning’; ‘I can set myself a task’; ‘I can recognize my strengths and weaknesses as a learner and reflect on these’). Together, these descriptors constitute a checklist covering manifold aspects of autonomous language learning; however, they are not intended to be exhaustive or normative, but rather serve as a spectrum of competences which function as a tool in raising learners’ awareness of autonomous language learning processes. In addition, for each component learners can formulate their own descriptors. The full list of descriptors is available online.

Similarly, in common with the descriptors of language portfolios, these descriptors are provided with a qualitative answer system (‘I can do it’ ‘I would like to learn it’, ‘This is not important to me’). This means that there is no hierarchy among the components and the descriptors, in order to allow learners to choose freely the components and the descriptors upon which they would like to reflect and assess themselves.

The dynamics

This model is structurally and functionally dynamic. It is structurally dynamic, because each component is directly related to all the others. It is functionally dynamic, because learners undertaking self-assessment can decide to enter the model from any component and move freely from one component to another without following a given path, according to their needs and purposes. For example, they can start with ‘planning’ if they would like to focus on this aspect of the learning process (for example, ‘I can analyze my own needs’; ‘I can set myself goals’; ‘I can put together a learning plan’); and then move to ‘evaluating’, or to ‘motivating myself’, or to any other component they want to reflect upon. This dynamic feature is an essential characteristic of the model, and makes it possible both to account for the complexity of learner autonomy and to operationalize the construct, breaking it down in smaller portions. On the online version of the dynamic model, the interrelationships among the components and the descriptors are represented by hyper-textual links.

A Dynamic and Dialogical Approach for Self-Assessment

A prerequisite for the self-assessment process is the learner’s readiness or willingness to assess their own learning competencies. The willingness to undergo a reflection and self-

assessment process with the Dynamic Model requires, as Littlewood writes, “both the *motivation* and the *confidence* to take responsibility.” (Littlewood, 1996, p. 298). Some learners may not have the motivation and the confidence to critically reflect on their language learning process, but they would become open, “ready” (Cotterall, 1995) to do it within the advising process and/or in the pedagogical relationship with a teacher. Therefore, the use of the dynamic model is voluntary, rather than imposed. The self-assessment can be conducted either in language advising or in classroom settings. Whereas in advising settings the advisor can suggest the self-assessment to the learner individually, in classroom settings the teacher can link the self-assessment process to a series of peer and/or group activities aiming at developing autonomy.

The steps of the self-assessment process are:

- a) Getting started;
- b) Choosing components and descriptors;
- c) Assessing one’s own competences;
- d) Comparing perspectives.

In the first stage, learners are encouraged to reflect on their previous experience as well as their beliefs regarding autonomous language learning. In advising settings, this reflection can be conducted by the learner alone before the advising session, as a written text, using the prompts in the ‘Getting started’ section (for example, ‘How do you understand autonomous language learning?’; ‘What is your opinion about autonomous language learning?’; ‘Do you already have experience of autonomous language learning? If so, describe it briefly.’). Alternatively, the learner can discuss this topic with the language advisor during the advising session. In classroom settings, the reflection can be conducted with a peer or in small groups and eventually discussed in plenary. This process of reflection can be very useful, since learners’ perceptions, beliefs and previous experiences may strongly influence their attitude towards (autonomous) language learning, their decision-making, and, ultimately, the learning process itself (see Barcelos & Kalaya, 2011; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Navarro & Thornton, 2011).

In the second phase of the self-assessment process (choosing components and descriptors), it is important that learners autonomously decide which aspects of their learning process they would like to reflect upon and thus select themselves the focus of their self-assessment according to their needs, choosing one or more components and, for each

component, the descriptors they believe are relevant to their particular language learning process. In classroom settings, the teacher can also suggest specific tasks, such as implementing an individual learning plan, or choosing resources and tasks for individual objectives, and link them to the reflection upon the respective components and/or descriptors.

The third step is the actual self-assessment (assessing one's own competences) with the descriptors, comparing the statements with one's own experience in the language learning process. In advising settings, this step can be tackled when the learner is alone, rather than in the advising session, so that they are free of pressure regarding time and can answer the questions within an environment in which they feel comfortable. In classroom settings, the self-assessment can be done with a peer. Exchanging views with a peer can be useful for learners who are not experienced in self-assessment.

The final phase (comparing perspectives) involves discussing the outcome of the self-assessment with the advisor (or with the teacher in classroom settings). This is a key element in the assessment for autonomy, since it integrates the assessment within a pedagogical dialogue where the advisor and the learner reflect together and compare their perspectives on the learner's competences and on the learning process.

This pedagogical dialogue is the core of the assessment process and crucial for the development of learner autonomy (Little, 1995). In language advising settings, the reflective dialogue can be structured according to the learner's needs and attitudes (see Kelly, 1996; Mozzon-McPherson, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2015). The pedagogical dialogue enhances reflection and supports learners in the self-assessment process, which can be very challenging for learners if they are not used to it.

While the descriptors allow the learner's inner perspective to interact with an external perspective on autonomous language learning, the pedagogical dialogue with the advisor (or the teacher) offers to the learner a further external perspective on their reflection, and has the potential to unleash meaningful interaction, to bring to the surface and to elicit learner's beliefs and understandings.

Through this process, learners are enabled to reflect deeply, without constraints on their learning. After having chosen themselves the focus of their self-assessment, in the advising session they can initiate relevant topics for discussion, gain insights into their own attitudes and competences and establish the basis for future decision-making. This capacity for reflection and consequent action is both the aim and the outcome of the assessment process.

This assessment is merely formative and qualitative, resulting in enhancing metacognitive processes and, most importantly, it can be repeated, when and as needed, with the learner changing the focus, if they need so. The dynamic model's features and the qualitative, recursive approach contribute to making the self-assessment of autonomy a dynamic process.

Assessment Practices for Autonomy

The self-assessment of autonomy within a pedagogical dialogue as illustrated above is valuable not only for the learner, but also for the advisor or the teacher, since it provides insights regarding strengths and weaknesses of the learner and to pinpoint areas in which learners need further guidance or support on their development towards autonomy. For the learner, this is in many educational contexts a still rare opportunity to reflect on their own language learning, to externalize their own beliefs and attitudes towards language learning, to review or confirm their own assessment, or to address questions, if need be.

At the end of this process, learners should be able to make more informed decisions about their further learning.

However, since learners may not be used to this reflection, it is the duty of the advisor and/or teacher to design pedagogical practices enhancing reflection, and assessment procedures rewarding both for language proficiency and autonomy (Benson, 2010, p. 94). In addition, in order to overcome possible "learner resistance" (Cotterall & Malcolm, 2015, p. 171) towards new assessment practices, and encourage learners to engage in reflection, it is important to make the purposes of the self-assessment explicit within the process of autonomization.

Some Conclusions

The results of an investigation conducted on the dynamic model with students at the Freie Universität Berlin (Tassinari, 2010, 2015) show that a qualitative, dynamic approach to the self-assessment of learners' competences, attitudes and behaviors in autonomous learning processes is very useful for learners in order to reflect on and even to regulate the learning process itself. The students' feedback on self-assessment strongly suggests that the dynamic model and the descriptors are appropriate tools to support this evaluation process, and to foster awareness, reflection and decision-making. In addition, the dynamic model has been successfully used for self-reflection in other autonomy-fostering contexts, such as self-

directed English language learning courses (Beseghi & Bertolotti, 2013), and teacher education (Brandt & Dönhoff, 2013; Magno E Silva, personal communication).

The strength of self-assessment with the dynamic model is its dynamic and recursive nature, which makes it particularly suitable for assessing autonomy in its ongoing and fluctuating development.

Nevertheless, since self-assessment is difficult, “one of the most difficult things in autonomous learning processes”, as one of the students in my investigation affirmed, it is crucial to integrate it into autonomous language learning curricula, and to support it by means of appropriate pedagogic practices and reflective dialogue.

Notes on the contributor

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