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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Challenging the Conventions in Learner Development Research” for Issue 7 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ7), edited by Ellen Head, Aya Hayasaki, and Ryo Moriya. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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Concluding Commentary: Reflect, Write, and Share

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It is a privilege for me to write this commentary for Learner Development Journal Issue 7 (LDJ7), Challenging the Conventions in Learner Development Research. Since I started researching on learner autonomy a few years ago, I have realized the importance of “unconventional” ways of learning. By “unconventional,” I mean opportunities to explore what and how learners would like to learn according to their goals and interests. For me, that is what is referred to as “taking charge of one’s own learning,” the common definition of learner autonomy. Similarly, I think it is also important that teachers and researchers are allowed to be unconventional in their teaching and research respectively and exercise their teacher autonomy and research autonomy.

The main theme that I found in common in the articles is reflection, defined as “the intentional examination of experiences, thoughts and actions in order to learn about oneself and inform change or personal growth” (Mynard, 2023, pp. 23-24). All the articles discuss and/or involve the use and importance of reflection to a certain extent. Edsall’s paper, by giving a theoretical overview, invites us (teachers) to reflect on conventions about learner autonomy before suggesting the adoption of a complexity perspective and Critical Realism (Edsall et al., 2023). While some authors focus on learners’ reflection using narratives, interviews, and questionnaires, others share their reflection on teaching practices and journeys by means of interviews, autoethnography, autobiographical stories, and written dialogue. Based on these themes and the findings from each article, I will divide this commentary into two main parts: reflection on learning and reflection on teaching. I will conclude by giving some suggestions for learner development and teacher development based on what I have learned from the work in LDJ7.

Reflection on learning

Reflection is said to be a necessary part of the language learning process (Mynard et al., 2023) and is indispensable for the development of learner autonomy (Little et al., 2017), as it enhances metacognitive awareness and learner involvement (Cotterall, 2017). According to Reinders (2023), “Reflection is the heart and soul of language learning” (p. xiii).

From my observations as a learning advisor and my research on learner autonomy, the results of the use of reflection have been quite positive. For instance, I found that reflecting on their learning raises students’ awareness of their capacity and responsibility to take charge of their learning (Ambinintsoa, 2020), and some students even initiated reflection in other courses at the university and beyond the classroom, as they valued the benefits of reflection they gained in my class (Ambinintsoa, 2023). Although some students may find reflection not easy or enjoyable, they still view it as useful (Ambinintsoa & MacDonald, 2023). Having those positive findings in mind, reading Morioka’s article was rather an eye-opener for me, as he shows that reflection activities may not always be as effective as is often

thought. If students consider reflection as a mere requirement rather than an opportunity to evaluate themselves or aspects of their learning, reflection can be seen as a tedious task and is not as valuable as it should be (Morioka, 2023). As Morioka's students are not majoring in English, like most of the participants in my research above were, I understand that reflecting in English can be challenging for them. In his conclusion, Morioka highlights two important points. The first is about the necessity to give students (especially the ones with low proficiency) time to write their opinions before having them discuss in groups. The second is about students' completing the reflection sheet as a mere requirement. If students know that they will need to discuss their reflections with their peers, they may answer the questions in a more personal way. Furthermore, discussing their reflections may be more motivating for them, as that gives them the opportunity to share their ideas, feelings, and experiences; for that to be done smoothly, it will be necessary to provide them with useful vocabulary helping them to reflect deeper (Ambinintsoa & MacDonald, 2023). Additionally, reflecting with other people can generate new themes for reflection, as demonstrated in both Barfield and Nakayama's and Yarwood's articles.

Yarwood uses "narrative as both process and product" (Yarwood, 2023, p. 12). This enabled her student, Hiroto, to retell his story related to his self-directed language learning (SDLL) experience including his flux of emotions. From that story retelling, the student gained a metacognitive self-awareness, which according to Yarwood, helped him grow as a learner. As a learning advisor in the institution where Yarwood's research took place, I am very familiar with SDLL and the issues students commonly have when taking it, such as "postponing" the assignment due to lack of time management and being "overestimators." I have witnessed the excitement of freshman students at the beginning of the SDLL module, then being overwhelmed due to assignments and part-time jobs three or four weeks later, and finally dropping out. It is reassuring to see that the student in Yarwood's research was able to complete the SDLL module despite his "overestimator" identity and to finish it with satisfaction, which he connected to the development of his self-awareness. Also, it was clear from the research that his advising session with his learning advisor played an important part in his becoming more positive. That validates how learning advisors can play the role of listeners and motivators by using empathy (Kato & Mynard, 2015). This sheds light on how powerful advising, which is still less conventional in language learning, can be in transforming students' experience at a fundamental level. Using a narrative as a product, Yarwood conveys to the readers a message advocating that (re)telling one's own story can be a powerful tool enabling self-reflection and discovery of one's identity, which is in line with what Harrison demonstrates in his paper on autoethnography (described in the next section).

Like Yarwood, Kawasaki's research is similarly related to emotions. In her article, she investigates the impact of peer interaction on students' emotion regulation (ER). Her findings show that peer interaction can positively influence ER in a way that students' positive emotions increased thanks to the dialogue and collaboration emanating from the peer interaction. I especially appreciate her emphasis that "it is not that students' negative emotions disappeared through peer interaction, but rather that positive emotions became more dominant than negative emotions due to the positive influence of peer interaction" (Kawasaki, 2023, p. 74). Her insights seem to be in agreement with what is often stated in literature related to positive psychology (e.g., Gregersen, 2019; Oxford, 2014; Seligman, 2011): negative emotions are part of an individual (whether they are a language learner or

not); the aim is not to eradicate such emotions but to face them using one's strengths and to be more aware of the positives. The positive effects of peer interaction on ER shown in Kawasaki's research also connects with recent research findings about motivation and reflection with peers, which show that students gain reassurance, self-confidence, motivation, and more knowledge about learning strategies (e.g., Ambinintsoa & MacDonald, 2023; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Mercer et al., 2018).

Peer interaction resulting in motivation due to the opportunity to exchange ideas and help one another, is also mentioned in Yunita's paper. It is alluded to by her student, Kei, twice who struggled when his classes were online, and then really appreciated when they were back face to face. Kei felt that interaction with his classmates was important for him though he was not confident enough in his ability to communicate with them. He needed what Yunita refers to as "external support," which is one of the key factors related to the development of learner autonomy. Like Kei, Yunita's other student, Hana, also attributes her positive learning experience to external support: an inspiring friend and a supportive teacher, which further backs the concept that learner autonomy is fostered through and involves working with others (Dam et al., 1990; Little et al., 2017; Palfreyman, 2018). What I found interesting in Yunita's paper is the Indonesian context and the place of learner autonomy in it. From a country where learner autonomy is still an unfamiliar concept for language teachers, I am happy to know that positive progress has been made regarding autonomy: The word "autonomy" exists at the university and the word "autonomous" is mentioned in the Ministry of Education's publications (Yunita, 2023, p. 34). Though the implementation of autonomous learning may not be done yet, using those terms can already be considered as a significant step.

Reflection on teaching

I find it fascinating and refreshing when teachers conduct research about themselves and other teachers, as shown in three of the articles in this issue. Barfield and Nakayama's "patchwork multivocalic reflection" (Barfield & Nakayama, 2023, p. 130) demonstrates how research can be done and written in an unconventional way. First, the subjects of their research include themselves, that is, their learning and teaching experiences, as well as setbacks and inspirations that resulted in the desire for both to find ways to engage their students in their learning in a meaningful way. They begin with their autobiographical stories placed in parallel to each other. The two authors then respond to each other's stories in a form of letters, thereby opening their communication to the readers, before continuing their stories with more details about their respective practitioner research. They end the article with a dialogue in which they give feedback to each other's continued stories and ask questions about each other's experiences, prompting both to deeply reflect on those experiences and to come to the conclusion that learners' creativity and criticality are crucial aspects to develop in learners to facilitate engaged meaningful learning. Throughout the paper, the two authors talk about their students' experiences, which is powerful in itself. Nevertheless, what I consider as the most intriguing aspect of the article is the way the paper is written. By including several different forms of communication in their writing, the authors display the creative process of sharing stories and engaging in dialogue before our eyes.

Like Barfield and Nakayama, Harrison also discusses his own teacher development. Using autoethnography, he reflects on his own encounter with autoethnography as a research method, his experience using it for himself, and his experience using it in his

classes. He emphasises the power of telling one's own story, and he especially focuses on writing as a process. In doing so, he is practising what he preaches, which is very inspiring for me. Harrison explains that the process of writing triggers self-understanding, self-exploration, and self-discovery in relation to the context where a person is. His statement, "a pen and writing journal helped me better process and explore the world around me and my place within it; writing became a way to make connections and glimpse possibilities" (Harrison, 2023, p. 119) struck me, although I have been aware of the importance of journal writing through my own experience with it, through a number of research studies that I have conducted myself (e.g., Ambinintsoa & MacDonald, 2023), through my role as a learning advisor, and through the reiteration in the field of learner autonomy that written reflection is vital in the development of autonomy. That statement reminds me of what Little et al. (2017) say about writing:

Writing things down [...] is a necessary precondition for the reflection that lies at the heart of autonomous learning. [...] Writing also allows individual learners to express their autonomy in and through the TL, and it is the means by which the learning community is made visible, the learning process is documented, and relatedness - the collaborative interdependence of all members of the class - is given its due. (p. 27)

Though the focuses are different in the two statements, both describe how revealing writing about oneself can be. In addition to self-exploration and self-discovery, writing one's own story is also a way to use the target language in a meaningful way. As exemplified by one of Harrison's student's statements: "I got so excited about my own project that I didn't realize I was studying English" (Harrison, 2023, pp. 123-124).

The student's statement above is closely related to what Takagi et al. wrote in their article about one of their research findings on a teacher's (Naoya) practitioner research: "The students discovered what they could do with the language rather than only learning about the language" (Takagi et al., 2023, p. 90). As teachers, isn't it our goal to help students see how relevant the target language can be in their lives, especially in EFL settings? How many of our students do not see any point in learning a foreign language, but still do it only because of some external pressure or some superficial future goals? Naoya's students surpassed that superficiality and found meaning in their language learning thanks to his commitment to promoting creativity to develop learner autonomy. Naoya did not reject the imposed textbook in his school. Rather, what he did was to not only adapt it but also involve his students in decision-making regarding class activities based on the units in the textbook. He made his students aware of the curriculum requirements, and gave them choice, as well as opportunities to work together, which are all aspects of what Little et al. (2017) refer to as "handing over control to the learners" (p. 76). I am glad that Takagi et al. decided to conduct research about Naoya and his practitioner research, as Naoya's class is an excellent example of an autonomous classroom; and the article demonstrates how practitioner research is such an appropriate way to promote learner autonomy, and how learner autonomy and teacher autonomy (e.g., Naoya's adaptation of and negotiation about the textbook) are interconnected. Also, it is important to point out that Naoya's practitioner research was conducted in a junior high school, where the pressure on teachers to conform to traditional practices can be considerable.

Conclusions and recommendations

The work in this journal issue has enabled me to learn more about learner autonomy. Before reading Edsall et al.'s paper, I did not even think that there are conventions of learner autonomy that can be challenged. Digging deeper into different theories and trying to adapt and combining them are complicated, and the complexity of such fusion and adaptation, can be difficult to digest (at least for me). However, the reflection questions after each section were really helpful, as they allowed me to relate those discussed theories to my own teaching and learning experiences (Edsall et al., 2023). The other seven articles taught me about research methods on how to investigate the development of learner autonomy and to analyze emotions and identity among other things. They have also reinforced my belief in the effectiveness of reflection, reflective dialogue, autoethnography, and practitioner research on learner and teacher development. Based on the new knowledge and the reinforcement that I gained, I will conclude this commentary with suggestions about engaging in meaningful learning, telling one's own story, and promoting practitioner research.

Helping students find meaning in language learning should be our aim as teachers, and for that, they need to be able to take charge of their learning. As Williams et al. (2021) say, "[to] achieve success, learners need to feel that they are in control of their learning. They need to feel they are capable of learning the language and able to manage their language learning. [...] they need to see value in it" (p. 137). One way to give students control of their learning is by involving them in making decisions with regard to activities to do in class as demonstrated in Takagi, Tanaka, and Minami (2023). It may not be easy the first time, but they will gradually become accustomed to it with the teacher's support. As the authors demonstrate, support for and trust in the students are crucial. Another way to help students find meaning in language learning is to give them opportunities to tell and/or write their own stories, including language learning histories (LLHs), which is also recommended by Yarwood. As explained earlier, writing one's own stories can be really powerful, as it enables self-discovery. Writing LLHs can raise language students' awareness of strategies they have been using, their strengths, efforts, improvements, and successes in their language learning (Ambinintsoa et al., 2022), which they might not notice otherwise. Seeing all those positive aspects enable them to recognize their capabilities and see that their efforts have paid off, and that is likely to motivate them. Teachers can also write their own autoethnography or autobiographical stories. The benefits from writing LLHs described above can also be gained from such stories, and that has been demonstrated in different articles in this issue. Reading such stories can inspire and motivate other teachers.

My final suggestion is related to research for teachers. Takagi, Tanaka, and Minami show how practitioner research is an appropriate method to promote learner autonomy in a classroom setting. As stated by Benson (2011), the best way for teachers to research autonomy is through their in-class practice. Teachers know not only their learners but also the context including the curricula, and required materials (or absence of materials). They can use that knowledge to explore ways to help their learners find the meaning of their language learning and to exercise their teacher autonomy. Then, they can share the results of their research with other teachers, which can trigger reflective dialogue and collaborations.

Last but not least, as I am concluding this commentary, this issue has helped me realize the power of writing again. Had I only read the articles in LDJ7, I would not have

come up with all the ideas I have stated here. For instance, by writing, I was able to instantly think of the suggestions I made above as well as the one I had for the case where reflective activities might not be beneficial in certain contexts, which is addressed in Morioka's article. It might be obvious, but writing does help a great deal. Therefore, what I would like to suggest to teachers, as I close this commentary, is to write whenever you have opportunities. Reflect, write, and share when possible, and the Learner Development Journal is a good place for that.

Author bio

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