Learners' Voices in Language Learning

Symposium of the AILA Scientific Commission on
Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

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Report by Terry Lamb

The Scientific Commission organised another successful symposium at last year's AILA World Congress in Madison, Wisconsin. Convened by the SC convenors, Terry Lamb (University of Sheffield, UK), Ana Maria Barcelos (Universidade Federal de Viçosa, Brasil) and Richard Pemberton (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and now at the University of Nottingham, UK), the symposium explored the following questions relating to the theme of learners' voices:

- What can we learn from our learners' stories about their language learning?
- How can we access their voices and integrate them into our planning?
- What does 'voice and influence' mean in our contexts?

Given that learner autonomy is about opportunities to have a voice in the learning process, the challenge for the researcher and teacher is to gain access to these voices. The six contributions from around the world displayed a range of innovative research methodologies which allowed these questions to be considered from different perspectives.

The first part, entitled *Accessing and listening to voices*, focused on learners' accounts of aspects of language learning in a number of contexts: stories about the languages classroom in higher education as well as about study abroad; language learning histories, self-evaluation and counselling sessions; and metacognitive knowledge in self-directed language learning contexts.

The second half of the symposium, entitled *Voices influencing*, explored ways in which these voices can influence planning and teaching: individual differences, learners' stories and implications for the classroom; ways in which insights into out-of-class language learning might inform classroom practice and provide direction for the development of language learning software; and the ways in which the voices of learners in distance language courses can influence the processes of learning and teaching for all participants.

The first part opened with a paper by Beverly-Anne Carter (University of the West Indies, Trinidad), entitled 'Past, present, future: how learners' voices shape language learning'. Beverley discussed learners' stories about their language learning in three contexts linked to higher education: one set of data came from classroom-based language learners; study abroad students provided the second set of data; the third set of data was elicited from ESL teacher trainees. She showed how, in their diaries, the students' stories unfold in a fairly linear manner, progressing from past to present learning experiences. The trainees' stories are, on the other hand, more complex, weaving together past experiences, present training and future projections as facilitators of learning. All the accounts provide a rich insight into language learning and resonate far beyond the individual keeper of the diary.

In conclusion, the paper supported the claim made by others (see, for example, Solas, 1992; and Knowles and Cole with Presswood, 1994) about the utility of autobiographical accounts, confirming that giving voice to the learners' experience enriched foreign language education for all the teachers and learners involved.

The second paper, presented by Leena Karlsson (Helsinki University, Finland) was entitled '"Evaluation is something somebody else does to you": accessing, sharing and using learner voices, biographies and histories'. Leena's paper focused on English learners' self-evaluation and face-to-face counselling with a view to highlighting the relevance of learner histories to foreign language education. While doing research into how learners construct and tackle self-evaluation in an autonomous language learning environment, she described how she became convinced of the importance of the language learning history full of experiences, beliefs and personal theories that is brought to any new context or course. In particular, she argued that the long history of external testing cannot be ignored here. Moreover, learners' ways of conceptualising language and language learning form an integral part of their histories. She concluded that learner beliefs or learners' everyday knowledge of language need to be reflected upon by both learners and counsellors. In addition, it also became evident in her work that there are always echoes of voices from other, possibly less dialogic, learning encounters in the counselling sessions.

The first half of the symposium concluded with a paper entitled 'Eliciting metacognitive knowledge in self-directed learning programs', presented by Mia Victori (Universitat Autonoma of Barcelona, Spain), and Maria Àngels Piñana and Sarah Khan (Universitat de Vic, Spain). They described how there is a substantial amount of research studies today emphasizing the need to provide self-directed learners with methodological and psychological support, using Holec's and Dickinson's terminology. Both types of support are perceived as essential to help learners develop their language learning skills, and ultimately, their autonomy. Yet, whereas the literature provides us with several examples of applications of learner's methodological support, little is reported on how the learner's psychological preparation is undertaken, and particularly, how the learner's beliefs and metacognitive knowledge is elicited and dealt with in those programs.

The objective of this presentation was therefore twofold: (a) to provide a review of studies and contexts that have used different data elicitation methods and procedures for eliciting and fostering learners' metacognitive knowledge in self-directed learning programs; and (b) to present the preliminary results of an ongoing research study which, after evaluating those procedures, had selected and used different methods, both structured and open-ended, for eliciting and fostering self-directed learning students' metacognitive knowledge.

Alice Chik, form the University of Hong Kong, opened the second half of the symposium with her paper entitled 'From individual differences to learner individuality and identity'. She explained that language learners' stories have always been there, buried under curriculum and classroom routines, demonstrating how learners try to make sense of their own language learning and connect it to their socio-cultural contexts, and that individual differences, treated as the pre-conditions in SLA, may only be the starting point of a learning pathway. She explored ways in which learners' stories may show that learning is a process of transforming individual differences into learner individuality and identity, both inside and outside the classroom. The elicitation of these stories through different methods can result in a massive amount of data. With narrative analysis as the analytical tool, Alice suggested that it is possible to construct a coherent sense of learners' attempts to create this process, and

demonstrated this through extracts from analyses of interview data from learners of different age groups. Offering a working theoretical framework, she concluded with implications and possibilities of incorporating learners' stories into our teaching and planning.

The symposium continued next with Garold Murray's (Akita International University, Japan) paper, 'Life history research: Stories informing foreign language learning'. Garold argued that language educators' recent interest in learners' stories about their language learning gives rise to two important questions: What research methodologies are best suited to accessing and documenting learner's stories; and, how can these stories inform language learning theory and practice? His paper addressed these questions by reporting on a research project which had involved collecting the stories of Japanese English foreign language learners. The paper illustrated how narrative research methods and more specifically life history methods of data collection and analysis were adopted from the social sciences for use in this study. The learners' stories provided insights into out-of-class language learning which have the potential to inform classroom practice, the use of media and technology, and program development, and the paper concluded by proposing a direction for language learning software development based on the results of the study.

The final paper in the symposium was presented by Cynthia White, from Massey University, New Zealand, and was entitled 'Developing awareness of distance language learners'. Cynthia put forward the key challenge for anyone involved with distance or online language learning, namely how to develop an understanding and practical knowledge of learners when both teachers and researchers are for the most part remote from the sites of learning. Her paper explored different approaches used by teachers, researchers and learners to access the voices and experiences of learners in distance language courses and how these can influence the processes of language learning and teaching for all participants. The significance of 'voice and influence' – and related issues – were examined in online communities where more of the learner comes into view and where contributions posted by learners constitute much of the course content. Cynthia argued for the value of approaches which can capture the shifts in the perceptions and awareness of participants as their experience develops, and for approaches which also include participants in validating and elaborating on emerging understandings.

The symposium stimulated much discussion, with questions after each part, group discussions, and a panel session. The symposium was brought to a conclusion by Terry Lamb who reflected on the need for further research into learners' voices, in particular their varying nature and ways in which they can be accessed and taken seriously in the language teaching and learning project.