

Facing the Challenges of Distance Learning

**Language learner autonomy:
what, why and how?**

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What is language learner autonomy?

A working definition and some learning outcomes

- Language learner autonomy is a teaching/ learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning
- From the beginning they do this as far as possible in the target language, which thus becomes a channel of their individual and collaborative agency
- By exercising agency in the target language they gradually develop a proficiency that is reflective as well as communicative
- They also develop their autonomy as learners and users of their target language, which becomes a fully integrated part of their plurilingual repertoire and identity

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Example 1: 15-year-old Danish learner

“After four years of English, how would you assess your overall progress?”

I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home. Then I make a list of what to do or remember the following day. That makes things much easier. I have also via English learned to start a conversation with a stranger and ask good questions. And I think that our “together” session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them. I feel that I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent.

Dam & Little 1999: 134

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Example 2: adult refugee admitted to Ireland

Self-assessment at end of one-year English course

I want to learn to help my children and also for my future. I always missed medical appointment because I couldn't understand the receptionist when he was speaking to me. But now my English is very good. And my experience now is speaking good English with people and say many thing in English. My experience now is to help my children do their homework and I can write English in letters. Now, when I send my girls to school I can speak to their teacher and when I go to the GP I can speak and understand very well.

Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017: 198

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Example 3: Czech university students taking a course in English for sociology

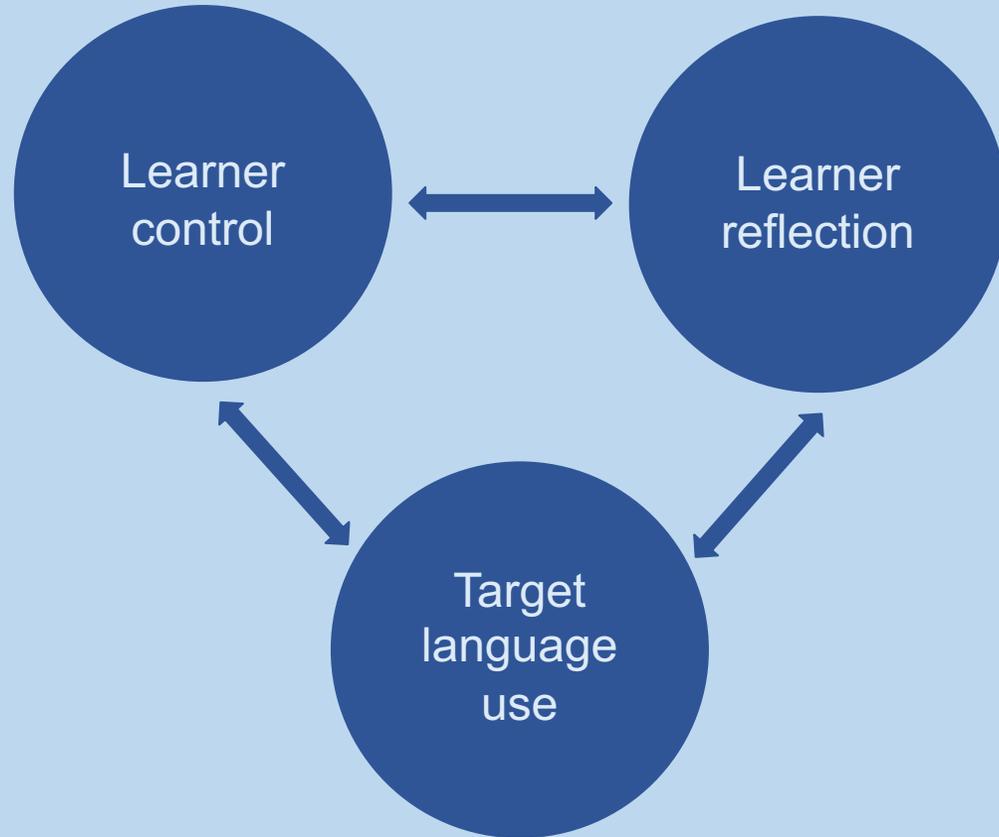
Feedback on portfolio learning

It was easier than in the first semester. I knew what to do, where to find things. I could work on what worked best for me. For example, I knew where to find great sociological videos that helped with my listening the most.

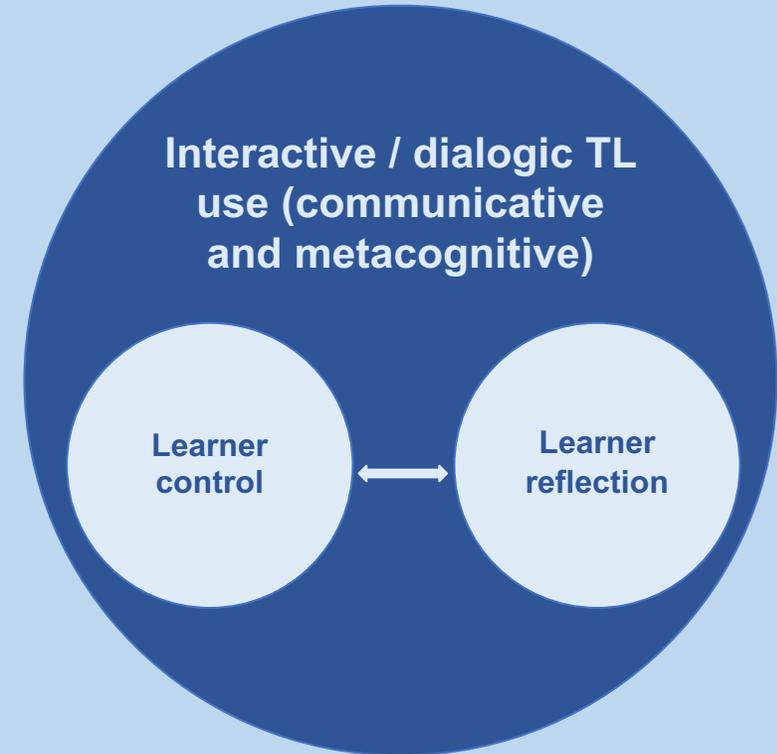
It is a great opportunity to be creative while doing a homework. Due to that it was my favourite one and I especially enjoyed creating mind map on Coggle.

I came to thank you, not for what you have taught me, because now I know that what I have learnt I have learnt for myself, but for showing me the way.

Three pedagogical principles



A teaching/learning dynamic



**Why should teachers adopt the principles
of language learner autonomy?**

Some theoretical arguments

Target language use

- The teacher's primary task: to initiate and sustain a *dialogic* learning conversation
- Writing is no less important than speaking

Current theories of L2 acquisition assign a central role to unconscious (implicit) learning that arises from target language use, while allowing that conscious (explicit) learning also has a significant role to play (Truscott & Sharwood Smith 2019)

Target language use should be *dialogic*

- In dialogue *all* participants are expected to take discourse initiatives
- When the teacher speaks to the class at length, she is not engaging in monologue but taking a “long turn” in the dialogic learning conversation
- Six principles to guide dialogic teaching: *collective, supportive, reciprocal, deliberative, cumulative, purposeful* (Alexander 2020: 131)

The ability to produce fluent and coherent written text is an essential feature of worthwhile L2 proficiency
In addition, writing plays an essential role in learning because it

- supports speaking
- encourages a focus on form (Olson 1991)

Some theoretical arguments

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Learner control

- The essence of learner autonomy
- Learners exercise agency – make choices, take decisions – in pursuit of curriculum goals
- Skills of self-management have to be learnt

Holec (1981: 3): Taking control of one's learning means determining the objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring progress, evaluating outcomes

When learners use the target language to take control of their learning, they commit themselves to

- spontaneous, authentic target language use
- conscious, explicit learning (cf. current theories of L2 acquisition)

According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci 2017), humans have three interdependent psychological needs, for autonomy, competence and relatedness

It is central to the teacher's task to help learners to develop the skills of self-management

- She must show them how to document their learning (logbooks, portfolios)
- She should never ask them to take decisions they are not yet able to take or leave them without support

Some theoretical arguments

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Learner reflection

- Essential for effective self-management
- Should be a dominant feature of the learning conversation
- Key role played by self- and peer-assessment

A learning conversation that is truly dialogic is also necessarily reflective – cf. Alexander's (2020) principles, especially *reciprocal*, *deliberative* and *purposeful*

Continuous documentation of the learning process

- provides an essential focus for reflection
- supports the internal dialogue that consolidates learning

A learning conversation that is truly dialogic is reflective, and reflection implies and should lead into self- and peer-assessment (Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017)

- Learners should be involved in determining the criteria for self- and peer-assessment
- Teacher assessment should be governed by the same criteria as learners' self- and peer-assessment
- Self- and peer-assessment and teacher assessment should take account of the criteria applied in external tests and exams

Making language learner autonomy a reality

Lower secondary, adult migrants, university students

Curriculum

- Make sure your learners understand what they are expected to achieve

Lower secondary

- Discuss the goals for each school year with your learners (simplify if necessary)
- Make sure they have the goals written in their target language so that they can refer to them regularly

Adult migrants

- If you must work with a traditional curriculum, translate it into an inventory of your learners' everyday needs and aspirations
- If you can devise your own curriculum, negotiate it with your learners on the basis of their needs

Language for academic purposes

- Aim: to help students to become members of their academic discipline *in their target language*
- Align your students' language learning goals with their larger academic curriculum goals

Lower secondary, adult migrants, university students

Curriculum

- Make sure your learners understand what they are expected to achieve

Target language as medium of teaching/learning

- Set clear rules for classroom communication
- Don't try to suppress learners' L1(s)
- Do emphasize the importance of writing

All learners

- Each learner's L1 is the medium of her/his consciousness and discursive thinking, and thus central to her/his sense of self and identity
- The goal of LLA is to **add** the target language to the learner's L1 in a fully integrated way
- Don't be afraid of exploring similarities and differences between the target language and the dominant language of instruction
- If you have multiple L1s in your class, draw them into the discussion
- **But** ensure that the discussion is conducted predominantly in the target language, with as much scaffolding as you need to provide
- Try to develop a two-way relation between writing and speaking: using written notes to support speaking and speaking to generate written text
- Remember that writing segments speech, which aids (i) comprehension and (ii) implicit learning of grammar

Lower secondary, adult migrants, university students

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Documentation of learning

- Set clear guidelines
- Ensure that logbooks or portfolios are in continuous use

All learners should use logbooks to

- keep a record of each lesson, including notes of new vocabulary, idioms, structures
- under the teacher's guidance, regularly monitor their progress

Portfolios

- Use portfolios to store group projects and share them with the rest of the class

Archiving

- In consultation with your learners, devise a system of archiving logbooks and portfolios so that they remain available to you (action research) and to the learners themselves

Learning contracts

- When your learners are used to managing their own learning, introduce learning contracts

Lower secondary, adult migrants, university students

Structuring learning

- Make sure that your lessons follow a clear, predictable structure
- Organize learning in clearly defined cycles: plan, implement, evaluate

Lower secondary

- A regular structure gives learners security: teacher time – learner time – together time (Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017)
- Gradually extend the length of learning cycles, from one or two lessons to several weeks

Adult migrants

- Learners typically have a wide range of needs
- Within a regular lesson structure, group work can meet individual needs – e.g., the group researches how to apply for a job; individual learners apply for jobs related to their particular skills

Language for academic purposes

- Decide with your students how learning should be organized each semester
- Several learning cycles will probably be easier to manage than a single semester-long cycle

Lower secondary, adult migrants, university students

Structuring learning

- Make sure that your lessons follow a clear but predictable structure
- Organize learning in clearly defined cycles: plan, implement, evaluate

Learning materials and activities

- Textbook?
- Strike a balance between
 - Activities that focus on aspects of the target language, e.g. vocabulary, pronunciation
 - Activities that produce spoken and/or written text

Lower secondary

- If you are not required to use a textbook, can you manage without one?
- If you are required to use a textbook, find ways of subordinating it to a *dialogic learning conversation* (Little et al. 2017)

Adult migrants

- If at all possible, don't use a textbook
- Instead, base teaching/learning on authentic materials that the learners themselves collect and bring to class

Language for academic purposes

- Instead of using a textbook, give your students the task of finding appropriate materials (printed text, podcasts, videos etc.) on the internet and devising projects that exploit them in various ways

Lower secondary, adult migrants, university students

Structuring learning

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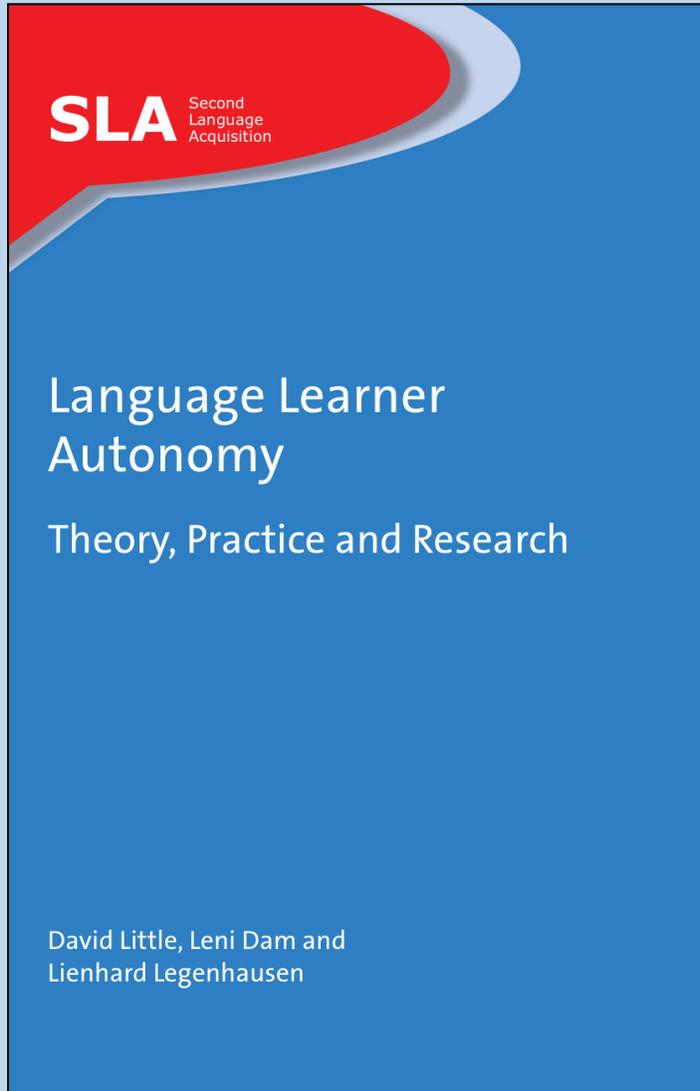
Self-, peer- and teacher assessment

- Criteria should be part of planning and implementation as well as evaluation
- Ensure that logbooks are in continuous use

All learners

- Regularly discuss with your learners how they think they are progressing towards their goals, as individuals and as a class
- Make sure that learning cycles are accompanied by regular reflection: What are we doing? Why? How? With what results? What next?
- At the planning stage of each learning cycle, help your learners to reflect on how they will know whether they have achieved the aims of the cycle
- As the cycle proceeds, make sure that each group keeps in view (i) its learning goals and (ii) its assessment criteria
- Help your learners to discriminate between different degrees of success

If you want more in this vein ...



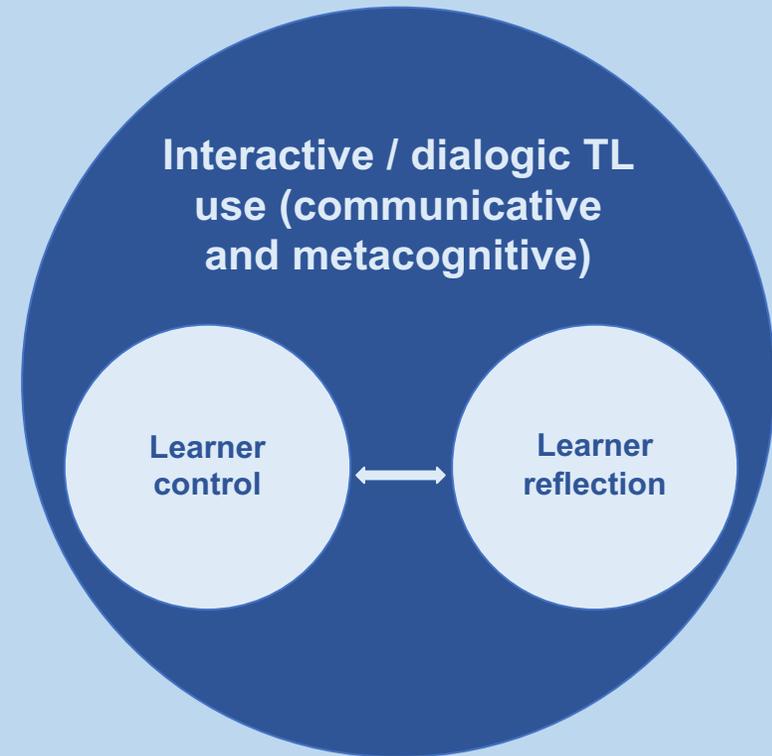
Published 2017 by Multilingual Matters

- A detailed description of an autonomy classroom in action: Danish mixed-ability learners of English at lower secondary level
- The findings of a longitudinal research project that explored the learning achievement over four years of one class and two individual case studies
- Two institutional case studies that illustrate the power of autonomous learning to support the social inclusion of adult refugees and the educational inclusion of immigrant children
- Suggestions for teacher education for language learner autonomy

Conclusion: autonomous language learning online

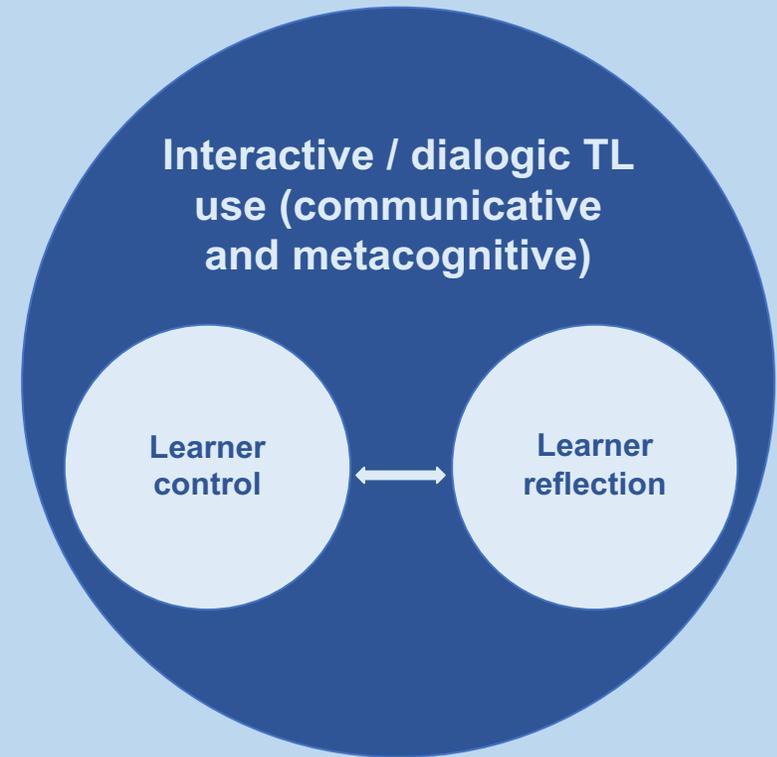
My working definition

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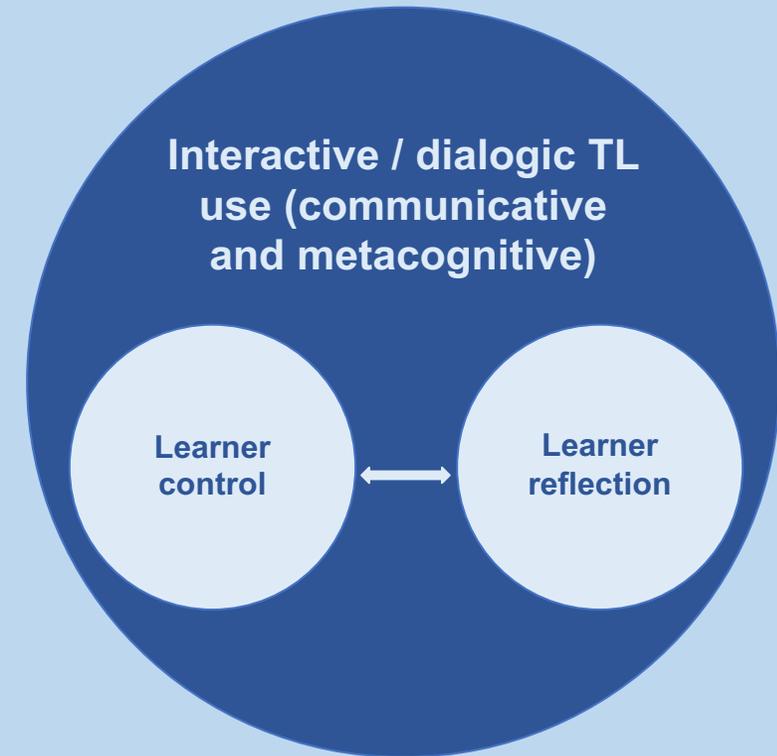
The teacher's role

- From “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side” (King 1993)



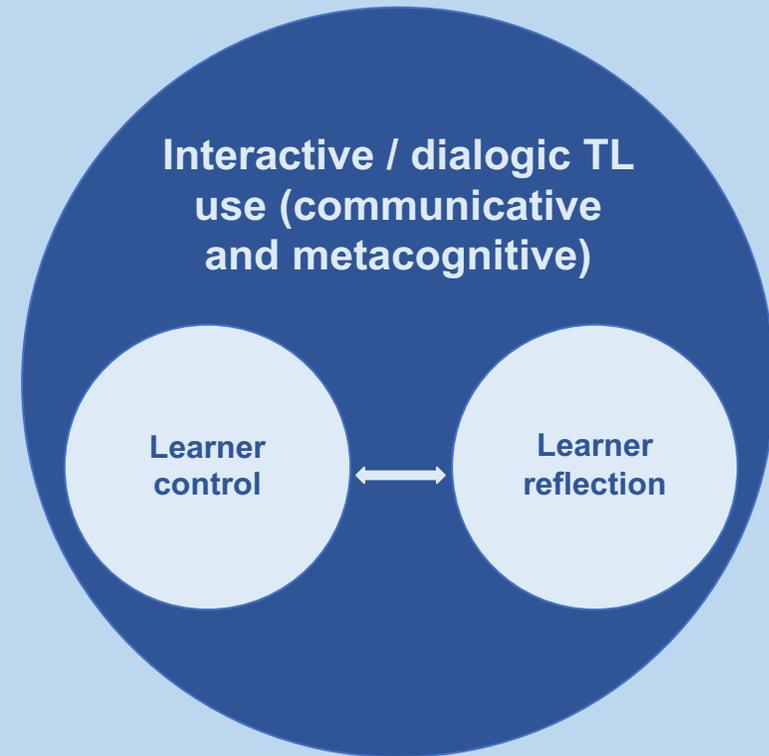
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The teacher's role

- ~~From “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side” (King 1993)~~
- Paradoxically, at every stage the teacher *leads* the development of language learner autonomy by
 - Launching and sustaining a dialogic learning conversation in the target language
 - Proposing learning activities appropriate to her learners' current level of proficiency
 - Scaffolding her learners' attempts to speak and write the target language
 - Showing them how to document their learning
 - Modelling assessment criteria and showing her learners how to use them
 - Monitoring the progress of individual learners and the class as a whole
 - Etc., etc., etc.

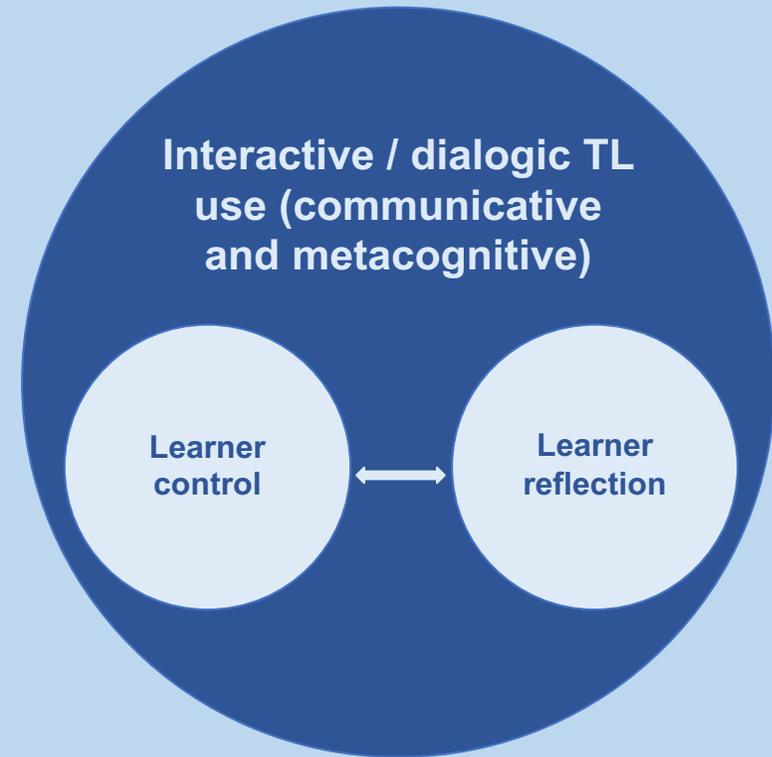


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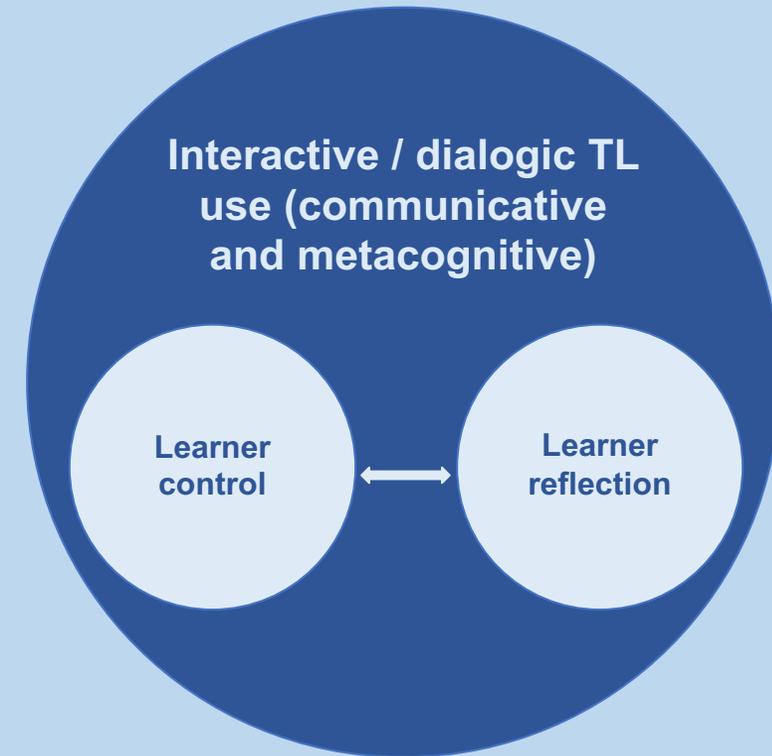
Without a skilled, attentive and proactive teacher, there can be no language learner autonomy

- Modelling assessment criteria and showing her learners how to use them
- Monitoring the progress of individual learners and the class as a whole
- Etc., etc., etc.



Online language teaching/learning

- Language learner autonomy is no less possible online than face to face
- Working with an online version of this dynamic, the key decisions include:
 - How often and for how long will the teacher interact with the whole class?
 - How will you arrange group work?
 - How will group projects be submitted and shared with the rest of the class?
 - By what means will your learners document their learning?
 - Within a framework of synchronous dialogic communication, will there be a role for asynchronous communication?
 - How will you provide for self- and peer-assessment, and how will they be related to teacher and/or external assessment?



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