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Autonomous Language Learning with Technology: Beyond the Classroom

A Book Review by

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Autonomous Language Learning with Technology: Beyond the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Autonomy beyond the classroom is a promising topic of interest for educators and will have its heyday in the years to come with the proliferation of information and communication technologies in the era of digital language learning and teaching. Chun Lai, with her timely book, *Autonomous Language Learning with Technology: Beyond the Classroom*, makes a clear contribution to this less-charted terrain with reference to K-12 schools and universities. She provides readers with an overview of the phenomenon in a book with three sections and a total of nine chapters.

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In one of his recent books, which provided a snapshot of the growth of the topic of autonomy in the field of foreign/second language (L2), Benson (2013) reported that an increasing number of articles and special issues have been published in the language learning and teaching journals, that several leading international conferences have taken place, that a number of collaborative works have been conducted and that over 30 book-length publications have been produced within the last decade. Despite the sheer quantity of the literature on autonomy, most studies are carried out with classroom learners or in classrooms, and limited research is concerned with language learning beyond the classroom (LBC) (Benson & Reinders, 2011). What happens outside of the classroom in regard to successful language

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learning is little known and, therefore, more research is needed to gain an in-depth understanding (Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015). Hence, LBC still lingers as a relatively unexplored terrain (Lai et al., 2015; Reinders & Benson, 2017). Given this, autonomy beyond the classroom is a promising topic of interest for educators and will have its heyday in the years to come with the proliferation of information and communication technologies in the era of digital language learning and teaching. Chun Lai, with her timely book, *Autonomous Language Learning with Technology: Beyond the Classroom*, makes a clear contribution to this less-charted terrain with reference to K-12 schools and universities. She provides readers with an overview of the phenomenon in a book with three sections and a total of nine chapters.

In the first section, *Understanding Out-of-Class Autonomous Language Learning with Technology*, the author presents background knowledge of the importance of autonomous language learning and LBC under four chapters. She discusses the concepts pertinent to autonomy and technology. With a framework of reference for the relationship between autonomous language learning and three different aspects of autonomy (e.g., autonomy as language learner, autonomy as language user and autonomy as person), she handles the topic in detail. She summarizes various models from the theoretical perspectives of autonomy beyond the classroom and stresses that the models presented in the book depict different lenses of the phenomena rather than a comprehensive list. By drawing the reader's attention to the fact that work on autonomous language learning is in its infancy and out-of-class practices, she questions the quality of learning ecology and focuses a lens on the positive associations between out-of-class learning experience and outcomes. Based on a range of LBC research from across the world, provides readers with some oft-cited internal factors (i.e., gender, language proficiency level, language learning beliefs/values) and external factors (e.g., teachers, peers and parents of learners, expectation and instruction type of educational institutions and characteristics of technological resources).

In the second section, *Promoting Out-of-Class Autonomous Language Learning with Technology*, the author examines language learners' needs and the roles of teachers for the development of learner autonomy in three chapters. She presents research-based evidence in response to the questions of what to support and how to support learners' autonomous language learning with technology. She proposes that to help teachers fulfil their responsibilities in promoting students' LBC, they should be informed about self-regulated learning through in-service training and should go through the same autonomous experiences as their learners. She outlines three major design principles for out-of-class learning. These are: (a) language educators should maximize the language-learning potential of the learners, (b) they should achieve an optimal balance between in-class and out-of-class learning activities and (c) they should prepare learner-centric designs.

In the third, and also the final section of the book, *Researching Out-of-Class Autonomous Language Learning with Technology*, the author links current and future research foci in a tabular format in two chapters. She first discusses the methodological considerations in research with regard to the challenges faced in capturing language learning processes and in evaluating the learner outcomes of out-of-class learning. Later, she calls for research on the systematic investigation of autonomous LBC, reflecting the insights present throughout the book. She also lists some direct ideas/recommendations and poses a few questions for educators and developers of learner-training programmes to ponder when designing programmes and environments to support learning beyond the classroom.

With a well-organized design, Lai shows the gaps in the literature by establishing a place for theoretical frameworks in earlier chapters of the book and, in the later chapters, provides the readers with many ideas for future research with a wide range of research-based findings. With the adoption of a visual approach, she covers the issue in detail and presents the main ideas in summary charts and process diagrams near the end of each chapter for the ease of reading and understandability. However, she fails in some aspects. For instance, even though she set out the content and intention of the book in the introductory pages, a separate preface or reflective introduction with regard to the aims and organization

of the book is missing. Furthermore, it sometimes becomes a little exhausting for readers to come across the same authors' names and read repetitively used references in each part, with much detail about each one—although the author does this deliberately in order to explain the topics.

Overall, the author prepares a reference guidebook of autonomous out-of-class language learning with technology and poses various questions awaiting responses from researchers. With its thought-provoking, explorative nature, this book is suitable for not only novice, but also expert researchers in the field. It can also serve as a valuable handy resource to all who would like to research new vistas of learners' out-of-class autonomous language learning with technology and extend their understanding of this uncharted terrain of the L2 research field.

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