Language learner autonomy and plurilingualism: agency, identity and the world outside the classroom

David Little
Trinity College Dublin

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My argument in a nutshell

- Language learner autonomy leads to plurilingualism as defined by the Council of Europe

- The Council of Europe's plurilingual approach to language education implies language learner autonomy

- Language learner autonomy and plurilingualism
  - are grounded in and seek to extend the learner's identity and agency
  - assume continuities between the formal learning of the classroom and the informal learning of life in the world outside the classroom

- In their conceptual and pedagogical interdependence, language learner autonomy and plurilingualism provide an approach to language education that responds to the challenge of the "multilingual turn" in applied linguistics and the multilingual populations of schools, colleges and universities

- As always, the principles on which my argument rests are confirmed by successful classroom practice
  - Language learner autonomy: Leni Dam at Karlslunde Skole (Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017)
  - A version of the plurilingual approach: Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) (Little & Kirwan 2019)

Overview

- Language learner autonomy

- Plurilingualism and the plurilingual approach

- Implications of my argument for language education in an age of linguistic diversity

Language learner autonomy

Learner autonomy defined – Holec (1979)

With reference to individual adult learners whose needs could not be met by a conventional language course:

- Autonomous learners take charge of their own learning by
  - determining the objectives
  - defining the contents and progressions
  - selecting methods and techniques
  - monitoring the procedure of acquisition
  - evaluating what has been acquired

  (adapted from Holec 1979: 4)

Learner control ⟷ Learner reflection
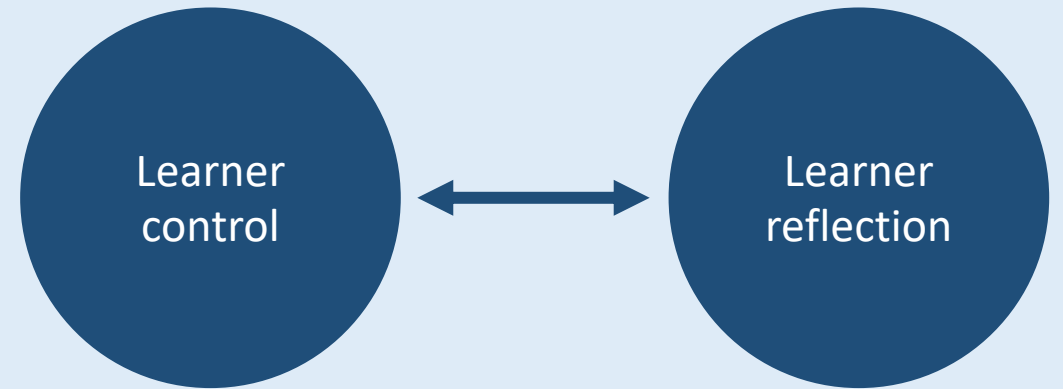
An essentially organizational view of learner autonomy that can be applied to all formal learning, not just language learning

Learner autonomy and the Council of Europe

- Holec's 1979 report was written under the impact of the Council of Europe's major adult education project of the 1970s, according to which
  - Adult education should foster "a new type of cultural production by taking the real problems of everyday life into account in carrying out the educational process" (Janne 1977: 17–18)
  - Adult education should be based on "self-learning", which "generally refers to the practice of working in groups, and to the choice by participants of objectives, curriculum content and working methods and pace" (ibid.: 27)
  - Working in groups "implies the possibility of dialogue (in other words, self-learning must be the result of an **interpersonal dialectical dialogue**)" (ibid.: 53)
  - Adult education "becomes an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man" (ibid.: 15)

- For the Council of Europe, learner autonomy has always been one of the foundations of education for democratic citizenship because
  - it ensures that our identity and agency are fully engaged in our learning
  - proactive and responsible control of our learning develops the capacities we need for proactive and responsible participation in democratic culture

Learner autonomy and pedagogical theory

- When applied to learning at school or university, learner autonomy is a way of bridging the gulf that easily separates formal learning from the rest of the learner's life

- This gulf has been a central concern of pedagogical theory since at least the 1960s (for a recent discussion, see Hannon & Peterson 2021)

- Barnes's (1976) distinction between *school knowledge* (curriculum content) and *action knowledge* ("the inner map of reality on which [our] actions are based"; Barnes 1976: 80)

- According to this view
  - the pedagogical challenge is to present and process *school knowledge* in ways that are accessible to learners from the perspective of their *action knowledge*
  - the pedagogical goal is to help learners to absorb *school knowledge* into an ever-expanding and increasingly sophisticated store of *action knowledge*

- We meet this challenge and achieve this goal by requiring our learners to share responsibility for planning, monitoring, implementing and evaluating their learning

Converting school knowledge into action knowledge

- Learning about animals' diet and teeth
  - "One child, if asked the right question, can tell you that some animals eat meat, some vegetable foods, and some both, and that this matches differences in their teeth" (Barnes 1976: 79) – *school knowledge*
  - "The other child has learnt that wild cats eat meat, knows that his own cat at home has a mixed diet, and wonders what effect this will have on his teeth" (Barnes 1976: 79–80) – *action knowledge*

- Learning a second/foreign language
  - The second/foreign language as specified in the official curriculum/curriculum guidelines is *school knowledge*
  - By involving our learners in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating their own learning, we ensure that they draw on their *action knowledge*
  - When we are learning a second/foreign language, converting school knowledge into action knowledge means developing a proficiency in the new language that becomes a fully integral part of our linguistic repertoire, bearing in mind that we use languages for reflective as well as communicative purposes ➜ *plurilingualism*
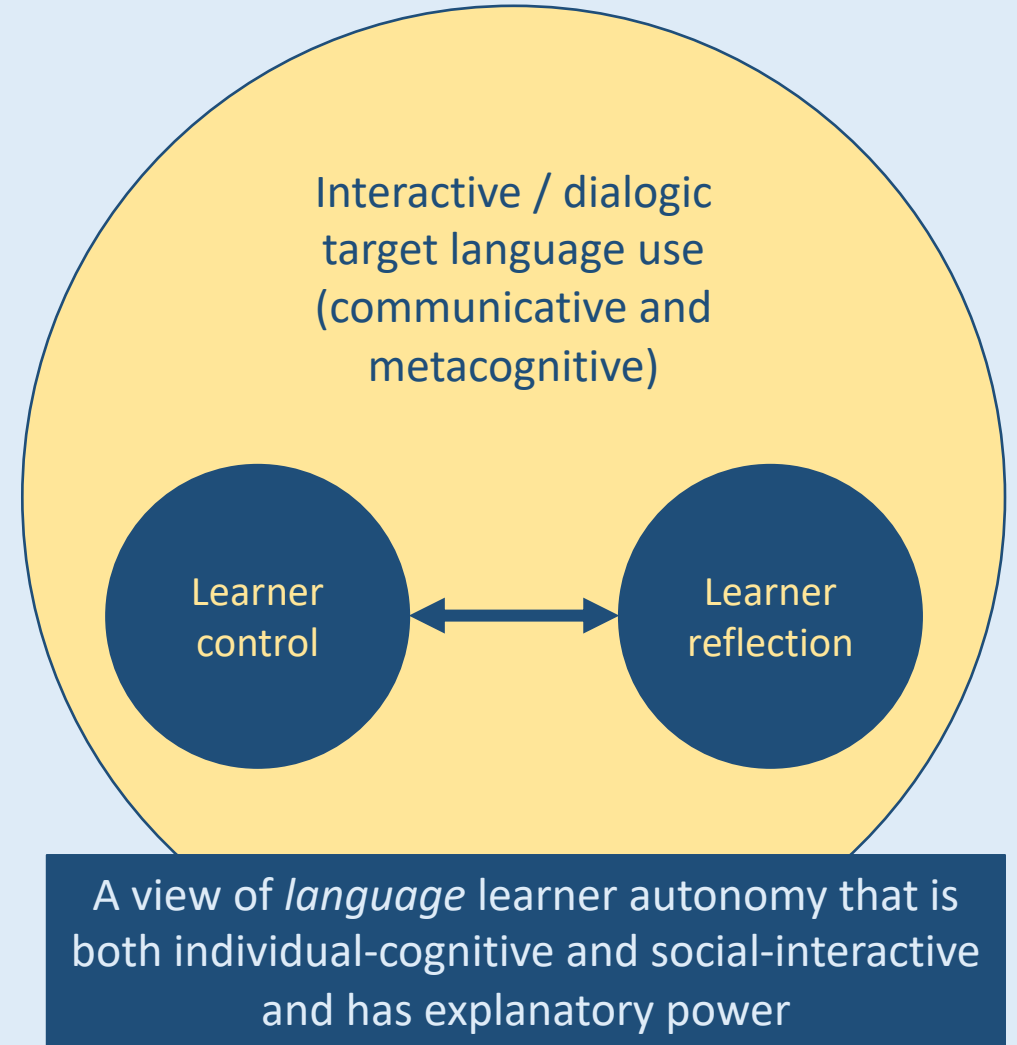
A pedagogical paradox

- All current theories of second language acquisition, whether nativist (e.g. Truscott & Sharwood Smith 2019) or usage-based (e.g. Ellis & Wulff 2019), assign a central role to spontaneous, authentic, interactive use of the target language
  - This implies that spontaneous, authentic, interactive use of the target language should play a central role in teaching and learning
- But learners have acquired and make daily use of their *action knowledge* in a language or languages other than the one they are learning
  - This implies that language teaching and learning should take account of and where possible exploit all the languages available to the learners, including home languages that are not part of the official curriculum
  - When managed effectively, this helps to make the new language (*school knowledge*) an integral part of learners' *action knowledge* → *plurilingual approach*

Language learner autonomy defined – Little (2022)

With reference to teacher-led learning in classrooms and virtual communities and informed by my collaboration with Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen:

- "Language learner autonomy" denotes 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, and the target language becomes a fully integrated part of their plurilingual repertoire and identity

Interactive / dialogic target language use (communicative and metacognitive)

Learner control ⟷ Learner reflection

A view of *language* learner autonomy that is both individual-cognitive and social-interactive and has explanatory power

Pedagogical essentials

- From the beginning the teacher uses the target language and expects her learners to do the same, which entails
  - elaborate scaffolding in speech and writing
  - frequent use of ad hoc translation to ensure that learners understand
- If learners are to benefit from this approach, they must have access to a full range of discourse roles, initiating as well as responding, which entails
  - that they are required to share in the management of their learning, individually and as a group
  - that they spend much of their lesson time working in small groups
- In order to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning, learners must develop a wide range of reflective skills
  - Doing this in the target language (to begin with, in very simple terms) ensures that they develop metacognitive as well as communicative proficiency in the target language
- Documentation of the learning process in logbooks and on posters supports learner control, facilitates reflection, provides multiple scaffolds for individual and group learning, and encourages and supports a symbiotic relation between writing and speaking

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The language learner autonomy approach – learner control and reflection embedded in dialogic use of the target language – necessarily engages learners' *action knowledge*, which includes their familiarity with how languages are used and may include a home language that plays no official role in their curriculum learning

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With what results?

Background

- A member of one of Leni Dam's classes in the 1990s

- At the end of her fourth year of learning English: Grade 8, 15 years old

- Text written in response to the question: "After four years of learning English, how would you assess your overall progress?"

- The task: to write a short self-evaluation

- The immediate nature of the task:
  - Learners must reflect briefly on the question and then write their response in their logbooks
  - They had no time for elaborate preparation, use of dictionaries, etc.
  - They must activate the same psycholinguistic mechanisms as underlie fluent speech

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; Little 2013)

Powerful combination of fluency and competence.

If produced by an Irish (native speaker) teenager, it would count as an excellent text.

It demonstrates the capacity of the language learner autonomy approach as I have described it to

- create continuities between learning at school and life outside the classroom: *"I already make use of the fixed procedures from our diaries when trying to get something done at home"*

- have an impact on general attitudes and behaviour: *"I think that our 'together' session has helped me to become better at listening to other people and to be interested in them"*

- develop learners' confidence and self-esteem: *"I have learned to believe in myself and to be independent"*

English is a **fully integrated part of this learner's plurilingual repertoire and linguistic identity**.

Plurilingualism and the plurilingual approach

Plurilingualism defined

- According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001: 4), individuals are plurilingual and societies are multilingual

- The CEFR defines plurilingualism as "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact" (ibid.)

- According to this definition, the concept of plurilingualism is a close relative of the applied linguistic concept of linguistic multi-competence (e.g., Cook & Li 2016)

- How languages "interrelate and interact" in the mind to form an integrated communicative competence is a matter of dispute (MacSwan 2022)

- But the essence of plurilingualism is that it comprises a fully integrated communicative and reflective repertoire that defines the individual's linguistic identity and is the channel of his or her agency

How does plurilingualism develop?

- CEFR: "the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments …" (Council of Europe 2001: 4)

- According to the authors of "Plurilingual and intercultural education as a project", "plurilingual and intercultural education is not to be thought of as a new methodology for the teaching of languages" but rather as "a change of perspective" (Cavalli et al. 2009: 7)

- On the contrary: the development of plurilingualism requires pedagogies that are
  - grounded in language use
  - engage learners' identities and agency (*action knowledge*)
  - use their existing linguistic repertoire to support the learning of new languages (*school knowledge*)

- For the Council of Europe, the plurilingual approach is designed to
  - accommodate and involve learners from minority-language backgrounds
  - promote the more effective development of language skills in Europe's education systems (*action knowledge*)

The plurilingual approach to (language) education

Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture

*Setting out to foster the development of integrated linguistic repertoires in which languages interrelate and interact, **[plurilingual and intercultural education]** takes account of and seeks to bring into interaction with one another:*

i.   *the languages and cultures that learners bring with them, including sign, minority and migrant languages and cultures;*

ii. *the languages of schooling, which vary in genre and terminology according to the different subjects taught and differ in significant ways from the language of informal everyday communication;*

iii. *regional, minority and other languages and cultures that are part of the curriculum;*

iv. *foreign languages (modern and classical);*

v.   *other languages and cultures that are not present in school and not part of the curriculum.*

(Council of Europe 2022)

Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), Blanchardstown, 2014/2015

320 pupils from 4½+ to 12½+ years

80% from immigrant families

Most had little or no English when they started school

51 home languages, most of them unknown to teachers

Afrikaans, Amharic, Arabic, Bangla, Benin, Bosnian, Cantonese, Cebuano, Dari, Estonian, Farsi, Foula, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo, Ilonggo, Indonesian, Isoko, Itsekiri, Italian, Kannada, Kinyarwanda, Konkani, Kurdish, Latvian, Lingala, Lithuanian, Malay, Malayalam, Mandarin, Marathi, Moldovan, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Shona, Slovakian, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Visayan, Xhosa, Yoruba

The Irish context

Language

- Irish the first and English the second official language
  - Irish an obligatory subject from the beginning to the end of schooling
  - Irish the first/home/preferred language of a small minority of the population
  - Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) also teaches French in the last two years

Demographics

- Steady increase in immigration since the 1990s
- Population grew by 31% between 1996 and 2016
- Ireland now a linguistically and culturally diverse society

Eight years of primary schooling

- Two preparatory years: Junior and Senior Infants (= pre-school in other countries)
- Six primary grades (Classes)

Child-centred curriculum

- Pupils should realize their full potential as unique individuals (Government of Ireland, 1999: 7)
- "… the child's existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning" (ibid.: 8) → *action knowledge*
- "… the child is an active agent in his or her learning" (ibid.: 8)
- Emphasizes the importance of the life of the home (ibid.: 24)

Scoil Bhríde's version of the plurilingual approach in 2015

Basic pedagogical principles

1. Plurilingual pupils will learn most effectively if they are encouraged to use all the languages at their disposal whenever they want to and for whatever purposes seem to them appropriate

2. Even very young children can be trusted to know how to use their home language as a tool of learning

3. Teaching and learning proceed via exploratory dialogue: pupils share the initiative in classroom discourse

4. Strong emphasis on development of literacy skills in English, Irish, French and home languages: involvement of immigrant parents in the development of their daughters' home language literacy

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- The languages pupils already know are the soil in which their *action knowledge* grows
- By encouraging them to use those languages, pupils are empowered to engage with *school knowledge* on the basis of their *action knowledge*
- The language repertoires that learners bring with them are the means by which they exercise and expand their *autonomy*

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- Principle 2 arises from the fact that the pupil's home language is her principal cognitive tool, the medium of her discursive thinking and her consciousness
- These functions of the pupil's home language explain why it would be cruel, misguided and vain to forbid her to use that language at school

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- Principle 3 coincides with the expectations of the Primary School Curriculum: exploratory dialogue is the means by which *school knowledge* is brought into interaction with pupils' *action knowledge*
- If pupils are to use their home language in the classroom, they must be allowed to share control of classroom discourse
- The combination of home language use and discourse control is expected to promote pupils' self-confidence and self-efficacy → *autonomy*

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- Principle 4 complements Principle 3: the development of literacy skills supports the development of oral skills and vice versa
- Scoil Bhríde's goal is to develop pupils' writing skills to the highest levels of age-appropriate proficiency in all the languages in their developing plurilingual repertoires

The Sixth Class fashion show (11½+)

My name is Marceline. I am 15 years old. I am in Holly star High. I am not that girly. I do alot of [sport]. My favoraite is Basketball. I h[ave] many trophies from Basketball. I like the colour blue and aqua. [Do] you think is beautiful? I reall[y like] my friends! I always go sh[opping] with them and go skate-board[ing] with them! Here is a small [part] of my story. Enjo[y]!

Is mise Marceline. Tá mé cúig bhliain deag d'aois. Tá mé ag freastal ar Holly star high. Níl fíor cailín mé. Is maith liom spórt. Is aoibhean liom cispheil. Bhuaigh mé a lán trófaí sa cispheil. Is aoibhín liom na dathana gorm[a] agus aqua. Is aoibhinn liom mo chairde [agus]... mé igconaí siopadóireacht le mo [chairde] agus ag scátáil le mo chairde! Bain taitneamh astu!

Je m'appelle Marceline. J'ai quinze ans. Je vais à l'école "Holly Star High". J'aime le sport. J'adore le b[asket]. J'ai gagné beaucoup de J'a[...] couleurs bleu et aqua. J'ado[re mes] amis — je fais le magasin [...] Je vais avec mon ami [...] Amusez [...]

我的名字是 Marceline. 我今年15岁. 我在"Holly Star High"上学. 我不是一个 Girly girl. 我很喜欢运动. 我最喜欢的是篮球! 我 ying 了很多的 jiǎng 杯. 我很喜欢篮色和水篮色真的很漂亮! 我非常喜欢我的同学和朋友! 我 jing 常和我的同学出去 gòu wù. 有的时 hòu 和他们 huá bǎn. Enjoy!

The immigrant pupil who taught herself Spanish

Background

- Nigerian heritage – home language: Yoruba
- Has been at Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) for almost eight years
- Scoil Bhríde's policy of including home languages in classroom communication engages pupils' interests and identities and generates great enthusiasm for language and language learning
- The Primary School Curriculum strongly oriented to learner autonomy/agency/identity
- Teaching is strongly dialogic, and writing plays a key role almost from the beginning (in Scoil Bhríde, copybooks fulfil many of the functions of Leni Dam's logbooks)
- Immigrant pupils transfer literacy skills from English and Irish to their home languages *autonomously* – with parental support but mostly without benefit of formal instruction (Little & Kirwan 2019)
- Pupils achieve high levels of age-appropriate literacy in English, Irish, French and home languages
- From an early age pupils engage individually and collaboratively in *autonomous* language learning projects

The immigrant pupil who taught herself Spanish

Spanish letter for Ms. Kirwan

Querido Ms Kirwan,

El más grande director jamás. Siempre te recuerdo y todas las cosas que haces. Se extrañaremos pero usted tiene que ir. Cada vez que pienso en ti. Voy a pensar en todas las cosas que has hecho para la escuela. Su amor por el lenguaje, su amor por el aprendizaje. Usted es una parte de esta escuela, Usted es una parte especial de esta escuela. Se queremos. No te olvides de nosotros. Por favor, visíta. Continúa riendo tú. No cambies, Mantengase el mismo.

I know you can't understand most of this letter, but it's just about how much we'll miss you, all the great things you've done for us. Your love of language and love of teaching. You're a special part of this school. We will always remember you and everything you do. Stay the same. We all love you.

How did she do it?

Had been to Spain on holiday and fallen in love with all things Spanish, so she:

- Found two books in the school library, one with a CD
- Has *"a book … to say what a chair is in Spanish or … put chair into a sentence"*
- Got a *"verbal book to learn my nouns and proverbs and stuff like that"*
- Uses Google Translate *"If I want to do something quick … but usually I use my own words and then I see if Google Translate can get it right"*
- Also uses Babel and *Five Thousand Words in Spanish* (online resource), which *"gives you quizzes as well to see if you're doing well or if you should go back to another lesson"*

The immigrant pupil who taught herself Spanish

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How good is her Spanish?

"I'd have been quite happy to receive this text from one of my *ab initio* undergraduates! From a primary school pupil, it displays an exceptional degree of sophistication, notably in the confident command of the subjunctive mood of verbs in negative requests (*no te olvides* – don't forget).

"It's not perfect, of course. The two major sources of error are (a) lapses in agreement (*Querido Ms K* should be *Querida*, and there is another example in the last two words of the text); (b) inconsistency in the use of the polite (*usted*) and informal (*tú*) forms. The latter is probably the point at which there is most obvious interference from English"

(Professor of Spanish at a Scottish university)

This pupil can use Spanish confidently, fluently and (mostly) accurately to express her own meanings: Spanish is a fully integrated part of her linguistic and cultural identity and a channel of her agency

Implications of my argument for language education in an age of linguistic diversity

A summary of my argument

- The language learner autonomy approach to language teaching helps to develop fully integrated plurilingual repertoires
  - By requiring learners to share control of their learning, the approach engages their *action knowledge* and involves them in a dynamic of teaching and learning that is truly interactive and interdependent
- The successful implementation of plurilingual approaches necessarily engages and extends learners' capacity for autonomous learning behaviour
  - By drawing explicitly on the linguistic repertoire learners bring with them, plurilingual approaches draw directly on learners' *action knowledge*, into which they absorb whatever new languages they learn
- Both approaches depend on strong and explicit links between the immediate context of formal learning and the world outside the classroom
  - Because they assign a central role to each learner's *action knowledge*, both approaches engage fully with his/her identity: interests, experience, attitudes and beliefs
  - In this way, both approaches are democratic in the fullest sense of the word

Common features of the two approaches

- Both approaches to teaching/learning are dialogic in Alexander's (2020) definition
  - They fulfil Alexander's six principles of dialogic pedagogy: *collective, supportive, reciprocal, deliberative, cumulative, purposeful* (Alexander 2020: 131)
- Both approaches use the target language as the principal medium of communication and interactive reflection, even when other languages are in play
  - They thus fulfil a central requirement for successful language development
- Both approaches assign a central role to reflection
  - Everything that happens in Leni Dam's classroom is framed by evaluative reflection
  - In Scoil Bhríde, pupil reflection is grounded in curiosity about language and the similarities and differences between specific languages
- Both approaches emphasize the importance of documentation
- Both approaches depend on an intense and productive synergy between speaking and writing

Reconceptualizing language teaching/learning

- Both the language learner autonomy and the plurilingual approach invite us to reconceptualize language teaching and learning

- The dialogic discourse that constitutes and maintains both approaches subsumes teaching and learning activities into broader processes of socialization and enculturation

  – Leni Dam collaborates with her learners in the creation of a community of language users whose purpose is to explore their interests and identities through the medium of English, always with reference to the official curriculum guidelines

  – Scoil Bhríde socializes and enculturates its pupils into the Primary School Curriculum: the inclusion of home languages in every dimension of the educational process fosters *inclusion* rather than the *alienation* that minority-language learners so often experience

- These considerations apply to language teaching and learning at all levels and in all educational sectors

Final thoughts

- "… if students' access to meaningful input is blocked or if they are provided insufficient or inhospitable opportunities to interact in significant ways, their language production will also be curtailed and their learning goals (plus their sense of themselves as people whose learning is valued and supported) will likely be negatively influenced. A common consequence … is attrition in language learning progress and the reasons underlying the termination of students' L2 study" (Duff & Talmy 2011: 104)

- The language learner autonomy and plurilingual approaches enable us to overcome this problem because in both cases the learning dynamic
  - is driven by learners' interests and identities (*action knowledge*)
  - engages and feeds learners' intrinsic motivation by requiring them to share control of classroom discourse
  - ensures that learning is always linked to learners' lives outside the classroom

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