UNIVERSIDAD DE LAS PALMAS DE GRAN CANARIA

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Critical autonomous language learning: The politics of learning words on your own terms

Santiago Betancor Falcón

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Escuela de Doctorado

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2025

Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

A mis padres, cuyo apoyo y cariño me enseñaron a aprender.

A mi directora de tesis, la Dra. Dolores Fernández Martínez, por orientarme y creer en mí.

Todo éxito de la formación universitaria es el éxito de un autodidactismo encubierto.

Jesús G. Maestro

El verbo aprender, como el verbo amar, no se pueden conjugar en imperativo.

Miguel Ángel Santos Guerra

Abstract

The academic literature on autonomous language learning (ALL) reveals scholars' great enthusiasm for the revolutionary potential of learner autonomy as well as pessimism due to its continual depoliticization within higher education. Similarly to how "learner autonomy" is today an unfinished construct that raises confusion among scholars, a theory of learner autonomy that accounts for its political implications remains largely unexplored in the field of language learning—hence, yet to be fully articulated.

This doctoral thesis, entitled *Critical autonomous language learning: The politics of learning words on your own terms,* is grounded in Critical Theory and comprises a compendium of three research articles. Its main objective is to develop a comprehensive critical theory of ALL. This critical theory of ALL entails an in-depth exploration of the history, politics, and philosophy of ALL, questioning dominant educational narratives while also providing clarity on our political objectives and potential avenues for political action. In doing so, it aims to drive educational reform and advocate for formal language education systems that better support student-centered and emancipatory methodologies.

The first article offers a critical genealogy of institutionalized language education, unveiling the structural and material factors that limit methodological innovation and constrain the development of learner autonomy and lifelong learning. The second article develops a coherent and nuanced theoretical framework for the critical practice of learner autonomy in higher education.

Results show how the field of language learning is dominated by uncritical and apolitical approaches that render learner autonomy a politically impotent practice, and advocates for a critically aware and politically active approach to ALL: one that raises students' awareness of structural and discursive constraints on their autonomy, drives educational reform and social change, while also maximizing both institutional support and student control.

Finally, the third article offers a first-ever detailed exploration of language self-immersion as both a novel self-directed learning approach and a social phenomenon, contextualized within its historical and political context. Furthermore, this article examines

the liberating potential of ALL outside institutionalized education, exploring the problematic implications of online self-learning and content-based autonomous language immersion.

In sum, this compendium of articles stands as a coherent and in-depth exploration of autonomous language learning, its politics, philosophy, and methodology: providing (1) a critically aware analysis of the origins and evolution of ALL throughout history [its past], (2) solutions to major gaps in the literature [its present] and (3), a coherent framework for the radicalization and promotion of learner autonomy [its future].

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research objectives

Autonomy—though inherently political—has been largely depoliticized within the literature on autonomous language learning (ALL), prompting critical scholars to express concerns over their continued failure to radicalize ALL to challenge and move beyond traditional modes of language learning and teaching (Benson, 2001, p. 35; Brookfield, 1993, pp. 227–239). Moreover, leading scholars have also highlighted that ALL remains an incomplete concept, often causing confusion among researchers (Benson, 1996, p. 1). This situation represents a major research gap in the relevant literature and, therefore, an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the field of language education.

The principal objective of this doctoral thesis is thus to develop a comprehensive critical theory of ALL. This critical theory of ALL entails an in-depth exploration of the history, politics, and philosophy of ALL, questioning dominant educational narratives while also providing clarity on our political objectives and potential avenues for political action. In doing so, this thesis also seeks to drive educational reform and advocate for formal language education systems that better support student-centered and emancipatory methodologies. To achieve these core objectives, this compendium of research articles aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the political and historical reasons behind the incompatibility of autonomous language learning with institutionalized language education? What new possibilities for the practice of ALL have emerged through the development of new technologies? What are the political implications of these changes?

2. What is the reason behind the long-standing depoliticization of ALL in the relevant scholarly literature? What would a coherent critical theory of ALL look like? What are our political objectives and potential paths for the promotion of autonomous learning in institutionalized language education?

3. What is language self-immersion? What are the dangers of full language learner autonomy on the internet? What does this methodology—as it is currently practiced in online spaces—reveal about the political nature of ALL and its practice both within and outside formal education?

1.2. Articles & thematic unity

This doctoral thesis comprises three articles published in academic journals within the field of language education with a focus on the philosophy and politics of autonomous learning. These articles and details about the journals in which they were published are provided in Section II. This collection of articles is unified by a common epistemological foundation—namely, Critical Theory—and a shared objective: to develop a comprehensive and coherent critical theory of autonomous language learning. Each successive article builds upon the previous one, enhancing and refining the overarching critical theory of ALL, the central contribution of this doctoral thesis.

My first article, titled *A critical history of autonomous language learning: Exposing the institutional and structural resistance against methodological innovation in language education*, provides a critical analysis of the history of language learning, the institutionalization of language education and the information revolution, unveiling the material, systemic and discursive factors that limit methodological innovation and hinder the development of learner autonomy and life-long learning in formal education.

Based on this analysis, I argue that scarcity and the system's rational functionality are the contingent factors that hinder the application of innovative methodologies like ALL and have configured traditional language teaching (TLT) as the de facto mode of language teaching within formal education. The conclusions of this article offer (1) a foundational theoretical framework for understanding ALL as an inherently political practice, and (2) a critical assessment of the possibilities as well as necessary conditions for (a) the implementation of innovative methodologies and (b) advocacy for education reform.

My second article, titled *Toward a coherent critical theory of learner autonomy in language learning: Exploring its political implications in higher education and limitations in the literature* builds upon the preceding one, aiming to (1) address a significant gap in the relevant literature—that is, the absence of a clear definition of autonomous language learning that accounts for its political nature—, and to explain and solve (2) the long-standing depoliticization of ALL—which has left this subfield stagnant and politically impotent for the past 20 years.

Building on the relevant literature, this article provides a coherent and nuanced theoretical framework for the critical practice of learner autonomy in higher education.

Results show how the field of language learning has long been dominated by uncritical and apolitical approaches, reducing learner autonomy to a politically impotent practice. Moreover, I argue that the solution lies in fostering both critical awareness and active political action to drive the educational reforms necessary for making formal education a supportive environment for the practice of autonomous language learning.

As may be noticed, these first two articles primarily focus on developing a coherent theory of autonomous language learning and examine its history and politics within the context of institutionalized language education. Although I argue that formal education is considerably unwelcoming of progressive methodologies like ALL, it would be naïve to simply assume that education would be most empowering and fairest if only we could remove all "oppressive state intervention"—a belief widespread across not only the field of critical pedagogy, but also political ideologies such as anarchism (both in its far-right and far-left versions).

Consequently, in my third article titled *Language self-immersion: Toward a critical theory of autonomous language immersion for a neoliberal digital age*, I offer a critical exploration of ALL beyond the context of formal education through an analysis of language self-immersion (LS), which is currently one of the most popular trends in informal autonomous language learning on the internet. This article thus provides a counterpoint to my critique of formal education, as it provides a critical analysis of the virtues and dangers of self-learning languages in the privately owned landscape of for-profit online platforms and through the unreflective consumption of media content.

Apart from this critical analysis, this third article also makes a significant theoretical and methodological contribution to the field, for it is the first work in the literature to provide a compendious study of language self-immersion: a self-directed approach to language immersion that combines the methodological benefits of language immersion with the principles of highly autonomous lifelong learning.

In sum, this compendium of articles stands as a coherent and in-depth exploration of autonomous language learning, its politics, philosophy, and methodology: providing (1) a critically aware analysis of the origins and evolution of ALL throughout history [its past], (2) solutions to major gaps in the literature [its present], and (3) a coherent framework for the radicalization and promotion of learner autonomy [its future].

1.3. Methodology

1.3.1. Critical Theory & methods

In my academic articles, I utilized a variety of methods and tools to address the research questions specific to each individual study—details of which are provided in the respective articles [see Section II]. Despite this interdisciplinary approach, my work remains coherently unified by the fact of being grounded in Critical Theory.

Critical Theory is a philosophical/sociological approach that aims to understand power and how it is used to maintain and perpetuate social inequality. Critical theorists thus seek to examine and challenge the power structures, ideologies, and unexamined assumptions that shape our reality, with the ultimate objective of unveiling the inner workings of power, exposing social injustice, and empowering individuals to oppose it (see Bronner, 2011).

Consequently, a critical approach to pedagogy posits formal education not as neutral, but rather as a sociopolitical institutionalized process that tends to maintain and reproduce power structures and social inequalities. Critical authors thus believe that an education that emphasizes democratic dialogue, active participation, and the development of critical thinking skills is an education that not only empowers the individual learner but also paves the way for social transformation (see Freire, 2014; Giroux, 2011) .

In my articles, I have examined various aspects of ALL, always grounding my analyses in the principles of Critical Theory outlined above. Critical approaches to unveiling and challenging injustice are often interdisciplinary and varied. To explore ALL from a critical perspective, I employed three main methods of critical inquiry across my articles: (1) critical analysis, (2) genealogy, and (3) qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA).

In my critical analyses, I questioned dominant discourses and pedagogical practices, while also engaging critically with the relevant literature on autonomous language learning. For example, in article 2.3, I challenge the widespread unexamined assumption that removing institutional coercion directly translates to educational freedom/emancipation by exploring the most problematic aspects of full learner autonomy in online spaces. Likewise, in article 2.2, I reviewed the relevant literature on ALL: building on the contributions of leading critical authors in the field, while also offering constructive criticism of their work when appropriate.

In the same line, genealogy is a form of historical critique that challenges conventional understandings of social structures and beliefs by critically examining their

origins and evolution. This approach, pioneered by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), was later developed by Michel Foucault in works such as *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and *Discipline and Punish* (1977). For example, in article 2.1, I conducted a genealogical analysis of the history of ALL, unveiling the political and material factors that have hindered learner autonomy throughout history, and questioning the legitimacy of our current system and its teaching methods. Likewise, in article 2.3, I also explored the genealogy of language self-immersion to better understand its evolution and modes of application from a critically aware and historical perspective.

Finally, critical discourse analysis has been defined as a problem-oriented, interdisciplinary, and thus necessarily eclectic range of approaches (Wodak, 2013) unified by a common interest in explaining how "abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk [i.e., discourse] in the social and political context" (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). In my third article [see section 2.3], I collected a qualitative sample of scholarly and online discourse about autonomous self-immersion, and then I evaluated it critically. This allowed me not only to gain insights into the different dimensions of language self-immersion—its theory and methodology—, but also to conceive it as a practice that emerges within a particular socio-political and historical period. Thus, I analyzed participants' discourse, pointing out their self-contradictions and denouncing problematic ideologies such as nativespeakerism and neoliberal rationality (see Giroux, 2014; Yebra López & Chohan, 2024).

1.3.2. Bibliometric literature analysis

Before beginning to write my articles, however, I conducted a general literature review on autonomous language learning as an initial exploration of the field. The reasons for this were as follows:

- To gain a holistic and in-depth understanding of ALL as a concept and its relevant academic literature.
- To identify and familiarize myself with leading authors, key works, and prominent research trends in the field.
- To identify research gaps within the existing literature.

To effectively navigate such an extensive body of literature, I adopted a structured quantitative approach, utilizing a bibliometric statistical tool known as *Bibliometrix*. Through this analysis, I aimed to answer the following questions about the evolution of the field as well as its current situation:

- How much is the field growing overall? What organizations in the field are publishing the most articles and on what topics?
- What are the most frequently explored themes and topics in the literature on autonomous language learning?
- What are the most cited works in the relevant literature? Who are the most prominent authors in the field?

Let us start by explaining bibliometrics. In science, measuring is knowing. However, how can we measure science itself? The careful study and systematic analysis of the vast scientific production in a particular field is a task that—due to its massive scale—largely exceeds our human capacity. Yet, measuring the quality and quantity of the scientific production is crucial since "almost every research assessment decision depends, to a great extent, upon the scientific merits of the involved researchers" (Gutiérrez-Salcedo et al., 2018).

Thus, this necessity for the development of tools and methods that enable us to draw conclusions from big data is what inspired the development of bibliometrics, which Pritchard (1969) described as "the application of mathematical and statistical methods to books and other means of communication". More precisely, this means "the quantitative study of production, growth, maturation and consumption of scientific publications" (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, it involves the analysis of networks (such as co-words, co-citation or co-authorship, etc.), which reveal the conceptual, intellectual, and social structure of the analyzed data of the literature (Batagelj & Cerinšek, 2013).

Nowadays, all the data about scientific publications (journal articles, patents, books, etc.) are stored in bibliographic databases, which provide valuable data for conducting bibliometric analysis. This technique is as useful as necessary, which is why "bibliometrics has become in contemporary context an essential tool for assessing and analyzing researcher's production, collaboration between institutions, impact of state scientific

investment in national R&D productivity and academic quality, among other possibilities" (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020, p. 2).

Now, there are many available tools for conducting bibliometric analyses. Following the most up-to-date review of said software tools (see Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020), I decided to use Bibliometrix and its user interface Biblioshiny (K-Synth, 2022) for this study. Bibliometrix is an R-tool that, thanks to its intuitive layout, is probably the easiest and most user-friendly software for non-coders. Besides, in terms of analysis options, these "stand out since they incorporate a great variety of different analyses". In practice, since it is recent, most of the analysis developed by the previous software tools have been incorporated in Bibliometrix / Biblioshiby (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020, p. 16).

> It allows to extract and analyze a bibliometric network (thematic, authors and references, among others), performs an evolution analysis, develops a performance analysis based on different indicators, applies a burst detection, draws a spectrogram, and show the geospatial component. (…) At this moment, maybe Bibliometrix and its Shiny platform contain the more extensive set of techniques implemented, and together with the easiness of its interface, could be a great software for practitioners. (Moral-Muñoz et al., 2020, pp. 16–17)

The first step to conducting this bibliometric review was to collect data. Numerous studies (Duman et al., 2014; Hwang & Tsai, 2011; Xie et al., 2019) draw attention to the utmost importance of synthesizing articles published in the Social Science Citation Index (Clarivate, 2022), for they have passed rigorous review criteria and are likely to have had a considerable impact on the field. Thus, for this study, I took my raw data from the Web of Science Core Collection, which includes peer-reviewed, high-quality scholarly journals from all around the world.

In elaborating my search query, I selected three main topics of interest for my review, which I connected by employing the Boolean "AND". These are the (1) "autonomous learning" of (2) "languages" in (3) "higher education". At first, I also considered adding the topic "policy" or "politics" to the query code, yet it excessively narrowed down the search results, and thus I decided not to include it.

Likewise, using the Boolean "OR" I added synonyms and concepts related to the three previously selected topics: "language/tongue", "higher education/university/college", and different concepts related to the study of learner autonomy such as "learner training", "self-

access", "self-directed learning", "self-assessment", and "self-taught". This was then my final search query: (language* or tongue) and ("higher education" or university or college) and (autonomy or "learner training" or self-access or "autonomous learning" or "self-directed learning" or self-direction or self-learning or self-assessment or self-taught).

This search provided a total of 1,850 results. To filter out documents unrelated to the topic I then proceeded to exclude documents pertaining to research areas related to the field of medicine: NOT ("Nursing or Medicine General Internal" or "Critical Care Medicine" or "Medical Laboratory Technology" or "Medical Informatics or Medical Ethics" or "Medicine Research Experimental" or "Dentistry Oral Surgery Medicine"). This lowered the number of results to 1,823 documents.

On the day 09/08/2022, I retrieved from this search a total of 1,823 documents from a total of 889 different sources (SSCI-indexed journals, books, etc.), published from the year 1992 to 2022 (see Table I).

Table I: ***Main information about the retrieved data***

Information about data	Results
Timespan	From 1992 to 2022
Sources (Journals, Books, etc.)	889
Documents	1823
Annual Growth Rate %	13.73
Document Average Age	6.61
Average citations per doc	5.195
References	43518
Number of authors	3495
Authors of single-authored docs	730
Single-authored docs	800
Co-Authors per Doc	2.12
International co-authorships %	8.996

Now, let us proceed to analyze the results of this bibliometric study. As shown in Figure 1, there has been a clear upward trend in scientific production in the field of ALL from 1992 to 2021. Between 1992 and 2004 though, only 46 articles were published, a rather small production as this means just an average annual publication rate of 3.5 articles. However, 14

articles were published in 2005, setting off an upward trend that, at its peak so far, has reached 174 articles published in 2018. Overall, this trend has an annual growth rate of 13,73%.

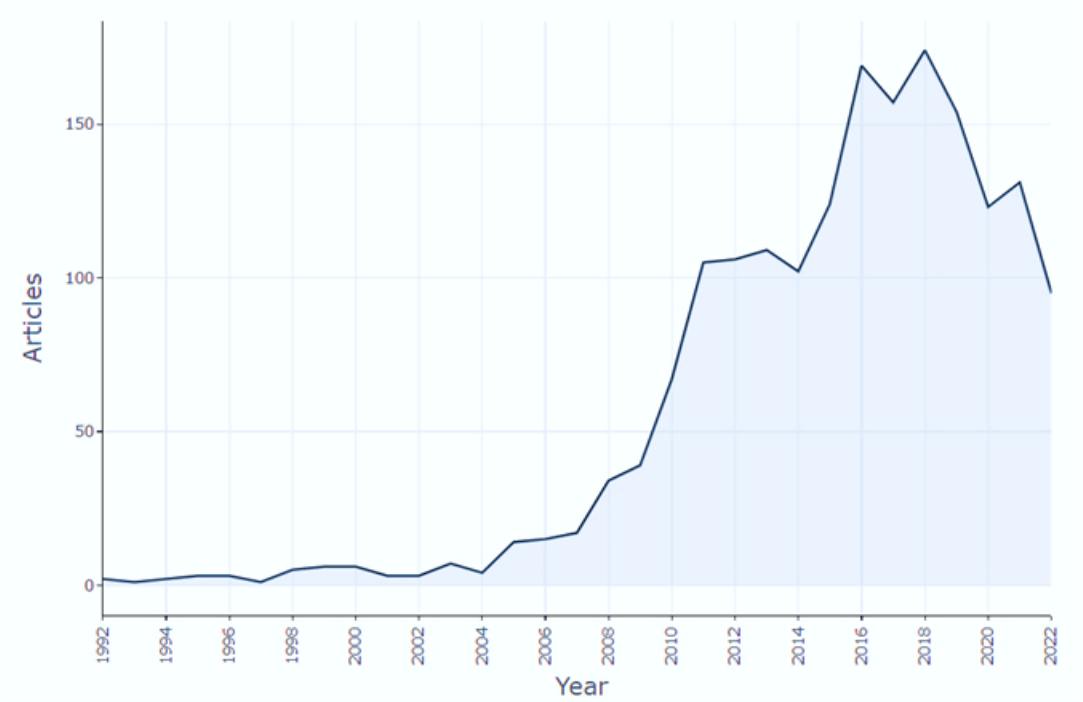

Figure 1: Line chart of the evolution of scientific production in the field of autonomous language learning.

When looking at the journals that publish the most articles on the topic of autonomous language learning (table II), the *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal* published by Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is by far the most productive one out of all, followed by the journal *Language Learning in Higher Education*. Looking at the main topics of these journals, it becomes clear that the concept of learner autonomy in language education is closely linked to self-access and methodological innovation, particularly through the use of emerging technologies.

Table II: ***Most productive journals in the field***

Sources	Articles
Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal	95
Language Learning in Higher Education	49
Arab World English Journal	25
Computer Assisted Language Learning	25
Innovation In Language Learning and Teaching	21
System	20
Foreign Language Annals	16
International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning	16
Recherche et Pratiques Pedagogiques en Langues de Specialite-Cahiers de L'Apliut	16
Profile-Issues in Teachers Professional Development	13

In the *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal* we find many articles dealing with either self-access centers or autonomy as a general topic. We can see that the idea of autonomy is discussed in relation to the use of new technologies, for example, in *Mobile-Assisted language learning applications: Features and characteristics from users' perspectives* (Alnufaie & Arabia, 2022). However, this seems to have become a bit of a small trend due to the pandemic in 2021, as can be seen, for example, in *University students' autonomous learning behaviors in three different modes of ict-based instruction in the covid-19 era: A case study of lockdown learning* (Banhegyi & Fajt, 2022), and other articles published during that same time (Ristea, 2022; Telfer et al., 2022).

In the *Language Learning in Higher Education Journal*, however, the practice of autonomous learning is much more linked to its practice within higher education. For example, *Self-access learning of English intonation with speech software: Examining learners' perceptions with a focus on their concerns and negative comments* (Tsang, 2022);

Non-English major students' perceptions of aspects of their autonomous language learning (Nguyen & Habók, 2022); or even in connection also to critical thinking and citizenship as in *Empowering learners in their critical, creative and autonomous thinking: from a good language learner to a better world citizen* (Argondizzo & Mansfield, 2022).

Now, let us examine the intellectual structure of the literature, specifically, the authors and how they interact with one another. In Figure 2, we can observe the co-citation network of the field, which shows how authors have cited one another. It is immediately apparent that Holec's article *Autonomy and foreign language learning* (1981) is the most cited work in the field. This is unsurprising, as it was in this foundational article that the concept of learner autonomy first entered the field of language education as a political goal of the European Union. The five most cited articles/books in the field are the following:

1. Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*
2. Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*
3. Littlewood, W. (1999). *Defining and developing autonomy in east Asian contexts*
4. Little, D. (1991) *Learner autonomy. 1: Definitions, issues and problems*
5. Dickinson, L. (1987) *Self-instruction in language learning*

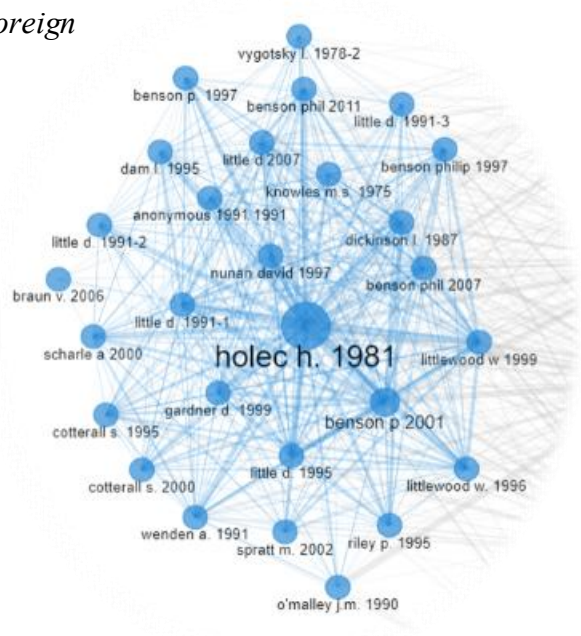

Figure 2: A co-citation network that shows how authors in the field have cited each other.

Similarly, when examining the most prominent authors in the field (Figure 3), we can see that Henri Holec, David Little, and Phil Benson stand out as top contributors, as they have authored much of the most influential research in the field.

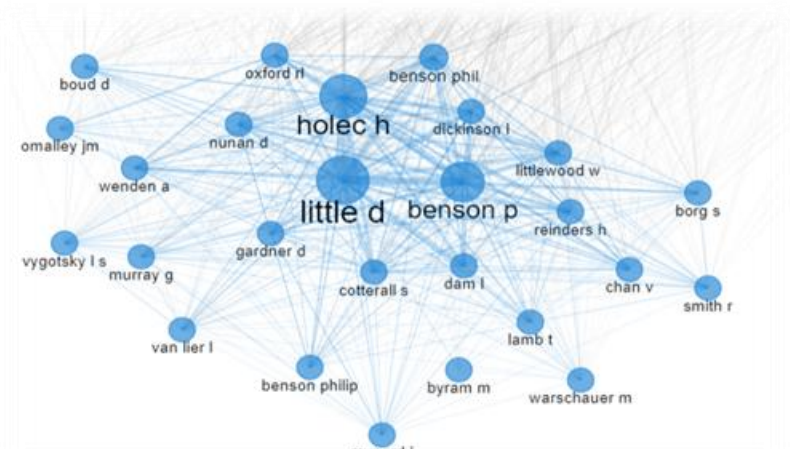

Figure 3: An intellectual network that shows the most prominent authors in the field and how they have been citing each other.

Now, let us analyze the conceptual networks, which will help us detect "relations between concepts or words in a set of publications" (Gutiérrez-Salcedo et al., 2018, p. 2). If we synthesize the most commonly used words in the literature, we notice that—in the case of both Keywords Plus (figure 4) and the network of most common words in articles' abstracts (figure 5)—words such as "language", "students", "autonomy", "teachers" do not really say much about the field, whereas concepts such as "motivation", "higher-education" or "performance" are more evocative topics, often associated with learner autonomy.

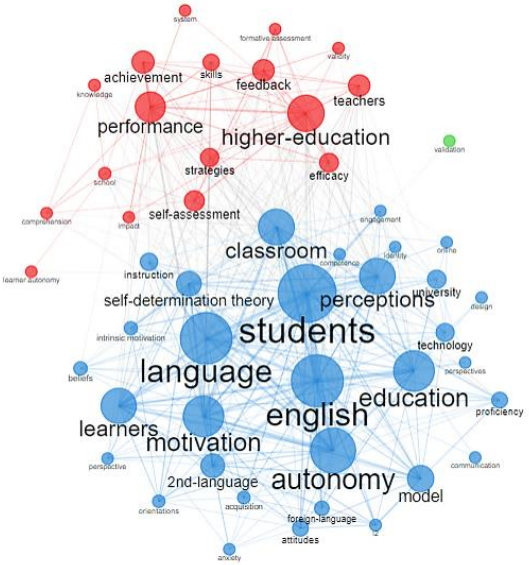

Figure 5: A conceptual network that shows the interconnection of Keywords Plus.

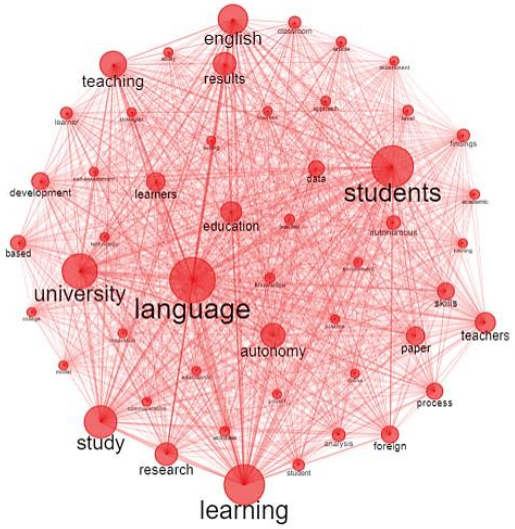

Figure 4: A conceptual network that shows the most used words in abstracts and how these are interconnected.

Nonetheless, when examining the co-occurrence of keywords chosen by the authors, we begin to observe interesting trends within the literature on autonomous language learning. In Figure 6, two main clusters emerge. The red cluster on the left represents the concept of autonomy specifically within the field of language education, while the purple cluster on the right pertains to the study of autonomy more broadly in other fields.

We can see that "learner autonomy" is commonly linked with concepts such as "higher education" and "motivation", as well as different methodological approaches to the development of autonomy, such as "self-assessment", "blended learning", "e-learning", or "learning strategies". This is the top six list of the most frequently used keywords by authors in the field:

1. Learner autonomy
2. Self-assessment
3. Higher education
4. Motivation
5. Self-directed learning
6. Language learning
7. Language strategies

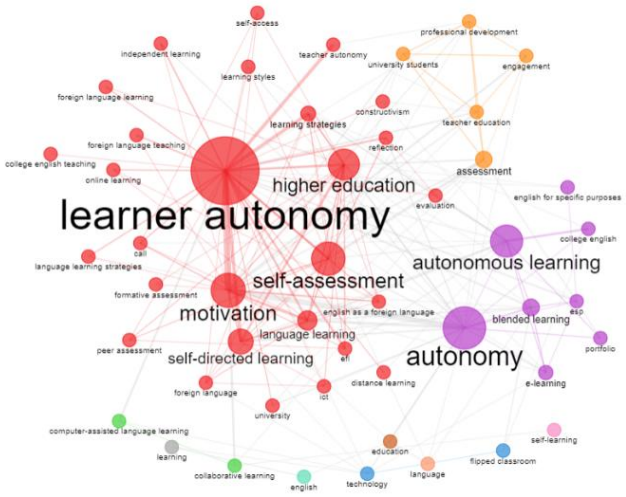

Figure 6: A conceptual network that shows the interconnection of keywords added by authors themselves.

For example, we find articles with the keyword "self-assessment" such as *Autonomy and self-assessment of individual learning styles using the European Language Portfolio (ELP)* (Peréz Cavana, 2012) that talk about portfolios as a tool for self-assessment. Articles concerned with promoting motivation are also numerous, for example, in *Engendering autonomy and motivation through learner reflection tasks* (Cooke, 2016) the authors propose self-reflection and self-assessment as positive and motivating activities for students. Finally, concerning the development of language strategies, we have, for example, *Self-directed learning as related to learning strategies, self-regulation, and autonomy in an English language program: A local application with global implications* (Hawkins, 2018).

As shown, interest in the concept and practice of learner autonomy has indeed been growing for several decades, even though in recent years this growth has faltered. This analysis elucidated a list of the most prominent authors and works on the concept of learner autonomy in the field of language learning. This list of literary classics helped me orient my research in its first stages, as these articles often contain "potentially important information for the development of a discipline and understand [sic] the past, present and future of its scientific structure" (Gutiérrez-Salcedo et al., 2018, p. 5).

Likewise, thanks to this bibliometric analysis, I was able to approach this vast body of scholarship in an orderly manner and gain insight into the state of the art on the theory of autonomous language learning, as well as popular trends within the field. I soon realized that ALL is a rather complex and incomplete concept that generates confusion among researchers, and that there are two main trends in the field: (a) the exploration of different methods for promoting learner autonomy and (b) research on the application of innovative technologies to assist autonomous learning.

Consequently, this quantitative review of the literature on ALL not only helped to orient my research but also revealed significant gaps in the existing scholarship. Firstly, the concept of ALL remained theoretically ambiguous, with its complexity yet to be fully articulated. Secondly, research addressing the philosophical, political, and critical dimensions of learner autonomy appeared to be severely underexplored. These aspects were so marginal in the literature that I could not include them in my search query, as doing so reduced the number of results to an extremely low number. All in all, this bibliometric review provided early justification for the relevance, originality, and potential contribution of approaching ALL from a critical perspective, which I soon confirmed as I further researched each individual article.

1.4. Theoretical framework

1.4.1. On political neutrality

Envisioning a freer, fairer, and more democratic future for our societies inevitably leads us to consider the cornerstone of political life itself: individuals' worldview. What the citizenry regards as factual or common-sense shapes and legitimizes the social and political order of all regimes. By the same token, however, revolutionary ideas have the potential to transform

what is considered possible, mobilize people, and bring about sociopolitical change. Clearly, there is power in controlling the dominant narrative, and so it is not unexpected that "education always plays a central role—whether in a visible or a veiled way—in any ideological project" (Henry Giroux as cited in França, 2019).

Consequently, educational institutions have always fulfilled political functions that transcend the mere enlightening of young minds. Some of these are the socialization of children, transmission of culture, social control, training, and placement of individuals in society, as well as the promotion of change and innovation (Ballantine & Stuber, 2017, p. 55). In this sense, the power that schools hold over the youth is remarkable, especially when considering that "no other Ideological State Apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven" (Althusser, 2014, p. 252).

Language education is no exception. From what languages are chosen to be taught at schools and universities to what kind of methodology teachers decide to implement in the classroom, everything says something about our understanding of knowledge, power, and how these two relate to language learning and teaching. For all the aforementioned reasons, the procedures and objectives of education are always political and ideological in nature. As author Henry Giroux correctly points out:

> I understand pedagogy as immanently political, but not because I believe it is desirable to impose a particular ideology on teachers and students. On the contrary, I understand pedagogy as political because it is inherently productive and directive practice rather than neutral or objective. (França, 2019)

Nevertheless, many scholars have already denounced for decades the strong culture of neutrality that permeates education (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005; Bartolomé, 2008; Crittenden, 1980; Filippakou, 2023), a trend that seems to have only worsened as Western societies have become more polarized in recent years. Nowadays, politicians, teachers, and even students tend to assume that a good education must always be neutral, or at least, non-political. Thus, education is imagined as a sterile procedure of knowledge transfer that must not be tarnished by ideology or politics. In this sense, neutrality is often regarded in our Western democracies as a virtue akin to tolerance or fairness.

This culture of neutrality becomes most apparent in the mental gymnastics some educators and students engage in when forced to comment on deeply political matters. For

instance, after almost a decade of experience working with teacher-education students, author Faith Agostinone-Wilson (2005, p. 4) noticed that calls for centrism take different forms: "(a) all points are equally valid, (b) you have to present all sides of an issue (usually without critique, so the student can 'make up their own minds'), (c) don't focus only on the negative, and (d) if I don't experience it (namely oppression), then it doesn't exist".

The general assumption is that a sense of "moderation" must always prevail in the classroom, even if that means shutting down debate. However, if neutrality in education means tiptoeing around difficult conversations and never taking a political stance lest this may ruffle some feathers; if, in the classroom, there are some opinions more "moderate"—and thus more acceptable—than others, then we must logically conclude that there is nothing neutral about this so-called "neutrality".

In other words, being fearful or unwilling to step outside the sphere of acceptable discourse is not being "neutral", but simply falling in line with the current status quo. Henry Giroux argues that there is nothing innocent about this:

> The people who produce that form of education become invisible because they are saying it's neutral. So, you can't identify the ideological, processes, politics, modes of power at work. That is precisely what they want, because power at its worst makes itself invisible, and the notion that education is neutral is one way of people who have dominant power making it invisible and making propaganda itself incapable of being seen. (França, 2019)

By this sleight of hand, the current ideological hegemony is presented to us as "neutrality" and "centrism". Any speech that conforms to this dominant discourse is considered "neutral" (i.e., acceptable, common-sense, realistic, and objective), while anything deviant from it is taken as "biased" (i.e., extreme, incendiary, and non-objective). This kind of sophistry stifles debate, represses critical thinking, and hides relations of power. In this manner, we can conclude that being politically correct or neutral is tantamount to endorsing the status quo.

However, beyond pretensions of objectivity and centrism, education always reveals itself as political. This is only natural, after all, we always teach towards certain objectives which inexorably exclude others. As Paulo Freire puts it:

> I cannot be a teacher if I do not perceive with ever greater clarity that my practice demands of me a definition about where I stand. A break with what is not right ethically. I must choose between one thing and another thing. I cannot be a teacher and be in favor of everyone and everything. I cannot be in favor merely of people, humanity, vague phrases far from the concrete nature of educative practice. (Freire, 1996, p. 73)

1.4.2. The origins of language learner autonomy

Unfortunately, the literature on autonomy in language education seems to also share this tendency to look past its political and ideological implications, reducing the practice and promotion of learner autonomy to just a collection of methodological strategies.

Nonetheless, autonomy is essentially political, not only because autonomy is a political concept per se (its Latin etymology meaning "self-governance"), but also because its planned promotion within formal education puts the self-governance of students in direct competition with the power and authority of teachers, educational institutions, and ultimately the state. Learner autonomy is thus an act of individual power (that of students) that exists within a net of higher-level power relations (educational institutions, the economy, etc.).

Even if often treated as neutral, the concept of autonomy first entered the field of language education as a desirable political goal, as can be first attested in Holec's report to the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, where he simply defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1981, p. 3). This project led to the creation of the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues* (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, which quickly became a focal point of practice and research in the field, under the leadership of its founder, Yves Châlon, who after an early death would be substituted by Henri Holec (Benson, 2001, p. 8).

The journal *Mélangues Pédagogiques* published at CRAPEL has been key in disseminating research on autonomy ever since the 70s, and the approach developed by CRAPEL was also innovative in its ideas of learner training and the self-access resource center (Benson, 2001, p. 8). This project aimed to provide resources for adult learners so they could conduct lifelong learning. Hence, their approach was heavily influenced by the field of adult self-directed learning, which typically studies the autonomous learning of adults who are unable to—or prefer not to—participate in formal education programs.

However, these ideas will later be extrapolated and applied to the language classroom. In Holec's report, we can already see that the promotion of autonomy is explicitly framed as an ideological and political issue, as he considered it an innovation that insists "on the need to develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives" (Benson, 1996, p. 29). Benson (1996, p. 29) synthesizes Holec's work in three key components:

1. a dual emphasis on the ability to carry out autonomous learning and on the learning structures that allow the possibility of developing and exercising that ability (1981:6; 1985: 187; 1988);

2. an insistence that autonomy can only be developed through the practice of self-directed learning (1980; 1985: 180);

3. a principle of full control by learners over decisions relating to their own learning and a concept of teaching or counselling as support (1985: 184; 1987).

Nowadays, the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) continues to acknowledge the importance of developing learner autonomy, because "once teaching stops, further learning has to be autonomous" (CEFR, 2001, p. 141), and so autonomy is regarded as an unavoidable precondition for the capacity to exercise lifelong learning. Nonetheless, in their guidelines, the promotion of autonomous learning is framed as entirely unproblematic, only mentioning some minor technical challenges that are presumed to be easily resolved through the provision of appropriate guidance and resources for teachers and students:

> Learners are, of course, the persons ultimately concerned with language acquisition and learning processes (…) However, relatively few learn proactively, (…) most learn reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks (…) Autonomous learning can be promoted if 'learning to learn' is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them and the options that best suit them. Even within the given institutional system they can then be brought increasingly to make choices in respect of objectives, materials and working methods in the light of their own needs, motivations, characteristics and resources. We hope that the Framework, together with the series of specialised user guides, will be of use not only to teachers and their support services, but also directly to learners in helping to make them, too, more aware of the options open to them and articulate concerning the choices they make. (CEFR, 2001, pp. 141–142)

Nonetheless, autonomous learning is not only a methodology that promotes student-choice, but part of a larger philosophical project with great political implications. Early academic interest in the concept of autonomy was first inspired by the socio-political upheavals of the late 1960s. In his report to the Council of Europe, Holec (1981, p. 1) contextualized the emergence of new ideas about autonomy, saying that

> the end of the 1960s saw the development in all so-called industrially advanced Western countries of a socio-political tendency characterized by a definition of social progress, no longer in terms of increasing material well-being through an increase in consumer goods and services, but in terms of an improvement in the 'quality of life'—an impression that did not become a slogan until some years later—based on the development of a respect for the individual in society.

Moreover, Gremmo et al. (1995, pp. 152–154) list what they consider to be the most crucial socio-political changes that explain this first popularity of autonomy:

- The wave of minority rights movements ("women's libbers", "gays", "ecologists", etc.) promoted values, motives, and aims that constructed an educational ideal of autonomy that greatly influenced European adult education.

- A strong reaction against behaviorism. This anti-determinist stance meant a general opposition to the establishment and authority and a search for alternatives in different fields: medicine, politics, music, etc.

- Developments in technology were also a key contribution to the spread of autonomy and self-success, with technologies such as the tape recorder, the fast copier, TV, the video recorder, the computer, the photocopier, magazines, etc.

- After the Second World War, the demand for foreign languages greatly increased as a result of political developments (such as the EU and the UN), the internationalization of business, migration, and easier travel and tourism. Likewise, these developments increased the demand for language education for specific purposes and self-learning materials for adult autonomous learners.

- Consequently, the commercialization of language provision, combined with efforts to enhance consumer awareness, began framing the learner as a consumer. This shift has significantly influenced public perceptions of and attitudes toward educational institutions, practices, and values.

As can be seen, the most ideological of these reasons are unmistakably aligned with humanistic and liberal values of individual freedom and democratic participation. However, the notion that a high-quality education stems from learners' intrinsic motivation to learn is a belief deeply rooted in our Western tradition. In Plato's Theaetetus (Carlill, 1906, p. 155d) Socrates affirms that "wonder is the only beginning of philosophy", for this sense of wonder must make us recognize our own ignorance, and with this gained humility, start questioning things. Hence, Socrates puts the onus on learners to pursue knowledge via critical inquiry, an idea that would be echoed by other great minds of later centuries:

> Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel
> (Socrates, 470–399 BC)
> You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself
> (Galileo Galilei, 1564–1642)

Ever since, the concept of autonomy has been influenced and enriched by many different disciplines. According to Benson (2001, p. 22), the main research fields and concepts connected with learner autonomy include: educational reform (freedom in learning), adult education (self-directed learning), language learning (focus on the learner), the psychology of learning (constructivism), and political philosophy (personal autonomy). In the field of educational reform, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued in *Emile* (1762) that students must learn through direct engagement with the subject matter, focusing on what they are naturally inclined to study rather than adhering to imposed methodologies—a recurring theme still prevalent in the literature on autonomy.

> Call your pupil's attention to the phenomena of nature, and you will soon render him inquisitive. But if you would keep this curiosity alive, do not be in haste to satisfy it. Ask him questions that he can comprehend and let him solve them. Let him know a thing because he has found it out for himself, and not because you have told him of it. Let him not learn science, but discover it for himself. If once you substitute authority for reason, he will not reason anymore; he will only be the sport of other people's opinions. (Rousseau, 1889, p. 124)

Nonetheless, these early philosophical ideas would later crystallize into different branches of political thought that propose a variety of progressive approaches to reforming institutionalized education. For example, within the constructivist tradition, John Dewey significantly contributed to the concept of autonomy in three key areas: "the relationship between education and social participation, education as problem-solving, and classroom organization" (Benson, 2001, p. 25). Dewey viewed learning as an adaptive process in which individuals engage with their environment and collaboratively solve problems with peers—ideas that form the foundation of modern constructivist approaches to education.

Dewey's conception of learner autonomy is fundamentally political since qualities such as independent critical thinking and personal agency are crucial for sustaining and advancing liberal democracies. Many authors concerned with schooling—such as Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, Carl Rogers, Bertrand Schwartz, Henri Holec, and Douglas Barnes—also reached this conclusion, proposing alternatives to traditional education while emphasizing

the importance of learner-centered approaches and the active participation of learners in the educational process. In sum, learner autonomy has long been regarded not only as a key component of an empowering and liberating education for the individual learner, but also as a prerequisite for the development of a citizenry capable of confronting injustice and driving progressive societal change.

1.4.3. State of the art & gaps in the literature

Having already examined the broader philosophical context and historical evolution of learner autonomy, let us now turn to its conceptualization within the literature on language learning, with particular focus on those authors who have sought to politicize the concept.

One of the most immediate early influences on the concept of autonomy has been the field of adult learning (Benson, 2001, p. 33). Contrary to the field of language learning, this field primarily explores the autonomous learning of adults outside the context of formal education. The leading figure in the field, Knowles (1975, p. 18), defines self-directed learning as follows:

> In its broadest meaning, SDL describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

However, the concept of SDL has been approached differently across different fields, evolving into a more generic term that encompasses several other, more specific concepts. According to Candy (1991, pp. 22–23), self-direction embraces dimensions of process and product, encompassing four different dimensions:

> Self-direction" as a personal attribute (personal autonomy); "self-direction" as the willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education (self-management); "self-direction" as a mode of organizing instruction in formal settings (learner-control); and "self-direction" as the individual, non-institutional pursuit of learning opportunities in the "natural societal setting" (autodidaxy).

Although self-directed learning has been considerably influential in language education, Benson points out that ideas from the field of adult learning can be problematic when applied in formal language courses, "especially if [students] lack the strong motivation to learn that is often assumed to be characteristic of adult self-directed learners" (2001, p. 35). Likewise, "self-direction is further open to criticism for its promotion of individualism and its failure to confront issues of power and control in learning" (Benson, 1996, p. 28).

In 1993, Stephen Brookfield published an article where he warned about a complete ideological crisis in the field of adult learning. The leading scholar asserted that self-direction—in principle, a mostly disruptive and transformative approach to learning—was already "comfortably ensconced in the citadel, firmly part of the conceptual and practical mainstream" (Brookfield, 1993, p. 227), what once was an "alternative form of practice that began as a challenge to institutional adult educational provision [had] become technocratic and accommodative" (1993, p. 228).

Earlier critical theorists had already noticed this tendency of humanistic educators to reduce the political ramifications of self-direction to "a narrowly reductionist technical rationality", as Brookfield explains (1993, p. 228):

> Griffin argues that discourse on self-direction is totally disconnected from questions of power and control in society and that it shows the misguided inclination of humanistic adult educators to depoliticize and decontextualize all practice into a concern for personal growth. Similarly, Collins writes that "far from empowering adult students, self-directed learning strategies steer them to a negotiated compromise with predominant interests which support social conformity". (1988, p. 63)

Of course, the depoliticization of self-direction was of great concern for Brookfield, since he regarded SDL as an inherently political issue that boiled down to (1) control over what are considered legitimate learning activities and processes, and (2) the material conditions required to exercise self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1993, pp. 232–233).

His approach was meant to be "an oppositional, counter-hegemonic force", yet he admitted that it was ironic how a concept "seemingly so bound up with ideals of liberty and freedom as is self-direction can end up serving repressive interests" (1993, p. 239). Many critical authors have tried to revive the revolutionary character of SDL (Brookfield, 1993; Garrison, 1992; Mezirow, 1985), yet Benson affirms that these have had little influence on the practice of autonomy in language learning (2001, p. 35).

In *Concepts of autonomy in language learning* (1996), Benson expresses concerns parallel to those of Brookfield, but this time within the field of language education. The author traces back this depoliticizing trend to Allwright (1988). This author claimed that autonomy was "associated with a radical restructuring of our whole conception of language pedagogy, a restructuring that involves the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working" (1988, p. 35), yet he suggested that autonomy might still be promoted within the context of institutional education.

According to Benson, this article represents an important stage in the transition away from "the structural conditions of learning and towards the capacities and behavior of the learner" (1996, p. 30). Later, Wenden (1991) sought to incorporate the methodology of learner training within the theoretical context of learner autonomy. In doing so, Benson argues that she further "[reduced] the structural element in the definition of autonomy", taking "learner's behavior in itself as a sufficient condition for autonomy" (1996, p. 30), as can be seen in this short segment:

> In effect, 'successful' or 'expert' or 'intelligent' learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous. (Wenden, 1991, p. 15)

Weden also explained that "encouraging learners to become more autonomous is a goal with which few language teachers would disagree" (1991, p. 11), demonstrating that autonomy was already starting to enter the educational mainstream in the 1990s, and along with it, the continual process of depoliticization. Nowadays, we may well argue that these concerns have already become a reality, as autonomy has become an integral part of the mainstream—or, at least, of its rhetoric.

Since this impasse, the scholarly literature on the politics of autonomous language learning has remained stagnant for over 20 years, impotent in the face of widespread depoliticization of education and the minimal penetration of progressive educational practices, such as ALL, into the dominant pedagogical repertoire of institutionalized language education. In the following compendium of articles, I expand on the work of the aforementioned critical authors, building on their contributions to address this gap in the literature and radicalizing learner autonomy by developing a comprehensive and coherent critical theory of autonomous language learning.

II. ARTICLES

2.1. A critical history of autonomous language learning: Exposing the institutional and structural resistance against methodological innovation in language education

Reference:

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Note: This 2022 article uses the terms "native speaker" and "native content/input", yet the current critical literature favors the use of "L1 speaker" and "authentic content/input".

In relation to the research objectives of this thesis, this first article aims:

(1) To establish a foundational theoretical framework for understanding ALL as an inherently political practice.

(2) To identify the political and historical reasons underlying the incompatibility between autonomous language learning and institutionalized language education.

(3) To examine new possibilities for the practice of ALL that have emerged from recent technological advancements.

(4) To offer a critical assessment of the possibilities as well as necessary conditions for (a) the implementation of innovative methodologies in formal education and (b) advocacy for education reform.

(5) To contribute to an explanation of the persistent depoliticization of ALL in the scholarly literature—an issue explored in greater depth in Article 2.2.

ABSTRACT

In our current information societies, opportunities for innovative language teaching methodologies are plentiful, yet we continue to teach languages as we did centuries ago. In this paper, I conduct a critical review of the history of language learning, the institutionalization of language education, and the information revolution in order to unveil the structural and material factors that limit methodological innovation and hinder the development of learner autonomy, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Based on this review, I further argue that scarcity and the system's rational functionality are the root problem as well as the foundation of traditional language teaching. The conclusions of this paper offer a critical assessment of the possibilities as well as the necessary conditions for the development of truly innovative methodologies and education reform.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-access, language learning, self-directed learning, lifelong learning

Self-access centers have for a long time provided learning materials, activities, and personalized guidance in order to help autonomous language learners develop their skills and learn how to take control over different aspects of their own language learning process. However, teachers and researchers usually take for granted the reason why this kind of support is so necessary. The reason is scarcity—as in lack of access to learning resources and adequate language learning environments—, which has for centuries limited the development of learner autonomy and has even shaped our current institutional systems of education. Let us start this analysis by exploring the crucial role of scarcity in the history of autonomous language learning.

In his book, *Deschooling Society* (1971), Ivan Illich comes to understand formal education as a state monopoly. However, influenced by economist Karl Polanyi, Illich would, later on, develop a less romantic, more historical understanding of formal education. Eventually, he came to understand education as learning "when it takes place under the assumption of scarcity in the means which produce it" (Illich, 1987, p. 12). From the point of view of the market economy, knowledge (like any other commodity) would then be valuable only in as much as it is both highly demanded, yet in scarce supply.

In this vein, Illich argues that our belief in knowledge as a scarce asset leads us to rationalize and legitimize the institutionalization of education by the state. Whether or not we today still regard linguistic knowledge as scarce is something that I will thoroughly

examine throughout this paper. However, we must start by reflecting on how the history of language education has indeed been marked by students' limited access to learning materials, native speakers, and input in their target language.

For most of human history, geography has played a key role in determining who gets to learn a foreign language. Access to the sea allowed coastal people to be "in touch with more of the outside world, (…) usually [becoming] more knowledgeable and more technologically and socially advanced than interior peoples" (Sowell, 1997, p. 13). In this sense, the challenges geography presented for transportation (and consequently the circulation of knowledge) have drastically influenced the history of language learning.

Likewise, socio-economic, and political factors have for millennia made education the prerogative of the elite and the clergy. If underprivileged learners were neither able to mingle with native speakers nor able to study languages formally with the help of a tutor, their only options were then to either get their hands on some learning materials or not learn a new language at all. Materials were exceedingly rare and consisted mainly of vernacular-Latin glossaries and conversation manuals.

However, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, socio-cultural, political, and commercial interest in modern languages would grow, and so, many authors would start writing learning materials to meet the growing demand. Yet resources remained scarce. It would not be until the beginning of the 20th century that language education would start to be institutionalized and thus made available for the masses. These were the beginnings of the professionalization of language education; private tutors thus became "teachers", a new identity that held more power and social prestige.

Even though public education has been a great advancement, fifty years ago, access to language education still varied greatly by socioeconomic status. Depending on one's background, access to learning materials and native speakers was very often hard to find and rather expensive. As a result, most people—unable to pay for such privileges—relied heavily on public language education.

In sum, scarcity in terms of availability of and access to learning materials and language content has been a major obstacle for autonomous language learners throughout history. In the realm of formal education, students' objective scarcity thus became language teachers' source of power and status, for they had a de facto monopoly on language as well

as its pedagogy, practice opportunities, and learning materials. It is in the context of such material constraints and teachers' ascendency that the methodology of traditional language teaching (TLT) originated. Henceforth, I will use this term to refer to the most common methodology we find in formal language education today. Let us now proceed to analyze it in detail.

A system shaped by scarcity

The emergence of the modern nation-state and industrialization brought about the need for countries to educate their populations. Inspired by the production model of fabrics, formal education was created to educate the masses. This type of school machined "generation after generation of young people into a pliable, regimented workforce of the type required by electromechanical technology and the assembly line" (Toffler, 1980, p. 26).

The search for efficient management of millions of new students only helped emphasize the need for methods and procedures akin to those of factories and chain production, in a process called Fordism. As scholar Rena Upitis (2004, p. 20) describes this process:

> Put a homogeneous group of children in a confined space (called a classroom), process them for a year (fill them with knowledge), make sure they have learned the set and predictable curriculum (test them according to established standards), move them to the next processing container (another classroom), and continue the cycle until they have reached the age at which they are deemed ready to leave (and enter the workplace).

Although in our current information societies the economy demands autonomy, dynamism, and innovation, the industrial mass education model still constitutes the core operatory logic of the system. Likewise, Fordism still conditions our understanding and experience of education as a centralized, standardized linear transmission of knowledge. Basically, "the teacher has the knowledge, and in assembly line fashion transmits that knowledge to the students. Then students are tested as to whether they have retained the knowledge that has been presented to them" (Upitis, 2004, p. 20).

Within the factory school, exams become thus of vital importance, since these occupy the last stage of the assembly line, where the work of teachers, students, and the system as a whole is judged on the basis of students' test performance. Thus, testing becomes everyone's main concern. Teachers' job boils down to making students learn the curriculum, so they may pass their exams with good scores.

Consequently, this emphasis on high-stakes testing and mechanical instruction of the curriculum makes students prioritize short-term memorization, just as it invites them to adopt the bad habit of cramming. Nonetheless, there are many more reasons why it is particularly in students' best interest to fixate their attention on exams and their GPA. This is because, even though testing does not necessarily guarantee any real long-term learning or useful knowledge for our changing economy, testing still does indeed determine much of students' academic and professional future.

In a nutshell, this is due to the fact that under the current industrial education model, credentialism rules. According to Illich (2000), along with the creation of mass education, the newly established institutions arrogated to themselves the right to determine what kinds of knowledge are legitimate or not. This means that the knowledge and skills one may possess are only valid if recognized by the state or parallel institutions of prestige. Naturally, this leaves us in a situation where certifications (i.e., officially approved knowledge/skills) are socially and politically considered more valuable than competence or knowledge per se.

This phenomenon is explained by Michael Spence's Nobel prize-winning economic model called "the signaling model of education," which states that academic success is highly valued by employers, not because they expect workers to remember everything they studied in university, but because academic success signals key characteristics that all "good worker" must have: intelligence, conscientiousness, and sheep-like conformity, as well as a certain socio-economic status characteristic of those who can afford an education (Caplan, 2018).

Likewise, in the field of applied economics, the "sheepskin effect" is a well-studied phenomenon that shows that people who possess an academic degree earn more money than those who have the same level of education but lack the credentials to show for it (2018, p. 125). In fact, the vast literature on the topic shows that graduation years are the most valuable of all because that is when students finally earn their diplomas (2018, pp. 125–126).

As Caplan (2018, p. 125) explains, holding a graduation diploma sends a strong message that "I take social norms seriously—and have the brains and work ethic to comply". Even if you have the same competence and skill as a graduated student, dropping out sends a very negative message to employers: "I scorn social norms—or lack the brains and work ethic to comply." Certainly, productive docile students make productive docile workers, which is exactly what employers want, people who work hard without complaining.

Additionally, this belief that "good students make good workers" is self-reinforcing. "If you want the labor market to recognize your strengths, and most of the people who share your strengths hold a credential, you'd better earn one too" (2018, p. 36). Moreover, from an Illichian perspective, we can see that it is precisely this institutional gatekeeping that makes legitimized knowledge scarce and thus socio-economically valuable and worth pursuing.

In turn, this leads to two additional big problems: malemployment and credential inflation. Most researchers agree that malemployment—that is, working at a job that is unrelated to or below one's level of education—is on the rise (2018, p. 132). Likewise, studies show that average education within individual occupations has been rising for decades. Since there are too many highly qualified workers, there are not enough jobs for all of them. Thus, the rest of highly qualified workers is forced to take mid-level jobs, in turn pushing other people into even lower-level jobs (Van de Werfhorst & Andersen, 2005, pp. 2–3).

The more credentials people have, the harder and longer you need to study in order to stand out and convince employers to hire you. Once again, Illich's theory is proven right, credentials are only valuable under conditions of scarcity: if everyone had a Ph.D., having a Ph.D. would lose all its differentiating value, and become the new bare minimum employers would expect from workers.

In sum, we can see how Fordism in education accentuates the linear transmission model to such an extent that exams—as the most decisive stage in the said process—have become not just a means to an end (to evaluate students' learning), but an end all in itself (passing exams for reasons other than its original evaluative function, like to obtain credentials and thence a job). This is, in fact, a well-studied phenomenon by sociologists, which in the terminology of Karl Mannheim is called "functional rationality"; that is

> the type of rationality that prevails in an organization of human activities in which the thought, knowledge, and reflection of the participants are virtually unnecessary; men become parts of a mechanical process in which each is assigned a functional position and role. Their purposes, wishes, and values become irrelevant and superfluous in an eminently "rational" process. What they forfeit in creativity and initiative is gained by the organization as a whole and contributes, presumably, to its greater "efficiency". (Zeitlin, 1968, pp. 311–312)

In the education system, we can then see this functional rationality in the fact that, as long as some few basic technical procedures are done successfully, the whole educational apparatus can continue functioning as usual regardless of people's alienation or the actual degree of learning and long-term retention of students, let alone the development of more abstract skills

such as autonomy, critical thinking, or life-long learning. Basically, the system will always choose efficiency over moral or intellectual considerations regarding "what education should be like".

In conclusion, we can see that education does not occur in a vacuum, nor it is based on humanistic ideals of learning for the pleasure of learning or self-development. The modern educational system was, in fact, first conceived as a solution to scarcity, in terms of people needing to be provided with instruction as well as in terms of meeting the demands of the labor market. Even though our current societies are vastly different from the industrialization era, the industrial education system remains unchanged.

This means that today's formal education continues to follow the same assembly-line model that reduces education to a mechanical process of putting information into students' brains, so they can pass their exams and, as a result, they may become useful to the interest of capital. Likewise, it is this same implicit rationale and foundational motives of the system that continue today to make us think that we live in scarcity, and thus thinking that language learning is exceedingly difficult—if not impossible—to be conducted autonomously. Now, let us proceed to analyze how these structural factors have shaped the way we have come to experience language education today.

Scarcity, the system, and traditional language teaching

As seen so far, the educational system was created as a solution to scarcity and inequality. Now, I will examine how scarcity, as well as these systemic structures and procedures of educational institutions, have shaped the archetypal methodology used in formal language education, which is characterized by being standardized, teacher-centered, and sharing the same tendency to make exams the end of its endeavor rather than aspire to foster learner autonomy, long-term acquisition, or life-long learning. Henceforth, I will refer to it as traditional language teaching (TLT).

TLT precedes the advent of information societies, and it is constructed around a historical notion of scarcity. By this, I mean that TLT is based on the assumption that students lack access to information and learning materials, and that (even if they had access) they are incapable of managing said information to educate themselves. From these beliefs, it then

follows that language teachers are naturally expected to be students' main (if not only) language learning resource.

Likewise, since students have for centuries depended on teachers to learn languages, teachers became the monopolizers of (1) linguistic knowledge—as only they speak the language fluently—, (2) methodology—as only they know about methodology and control instruction—and (3) learning materials—as only they choose and provide what is to be studied and evaluated. In simple words, teachers have for centuries monopolized linguistic knowledge and controlled its entire linear transmission. In this regard, we can see that teacher-centeredness is a historically and materially contingent construct, a methodology optimized for the linear transmission of information in a context of scarcity.

Consequently, teachers' job boils down to transmitting said "scarce" knowledge to students. However, this is an endeavor highly constrained by bureaucratic demands and the practicalities imposed by the assembly line. The teacher is expected to maintain control, teach a prescribed content, capture student interest in the content, match levels of instruction to differences among students, and show tangible evidence that students have performed satisfactorily (Cuban, 1986, p. 57).

The ends determine the means, and so teachers usually adapt their teaching approach so it meets all these requirements efficiently. A good example of this is how traditional teachers tend to strictly follow premade manuals. Textbooks thus become the backbone of entire language courses by providing teachers with the organized linguistic contents and premade language practice that they will teach and implement in the classroom. Admittedly, textbooks are convenient. They make instruction and evaluation standardized and mechanical, all the teacher needs to do is teach students its content, page after page, day after day.

Yet, for all its convenience, the use of textbooks also has serious drawbacks: the language content may be unauthentic and distorted; since they standardize instruction, they also disregard students' needs; they are expensive; and they deskill teachers who rely too much on them (Richards, 2001). When teachers only use textbooks, learning becomes "cumulative, successive, circular, and chronological" (Martín-Sánchez, 2022, pp. 52–53).

Of course, motivated teachers may try to complement their approach with different tools, content, or self-made materials, which is good. However, considering the rational functionality of the system, we must acknowledge the fact that as long as students pass their

exams, instruction can, in fact, consist of a methodology as simple as following the textbook. As noted by Philip Jackson in *The Teacher and the Machine* (1968), teachers have learned to only use the tools that make their job easier. In fact, as Cuban (1986, p. 58) further elaborates:

> The tools that teachers have added to their repertoire over time (e.g., chalkboard and text-books) have been simple, durable, flexible, and responsive to teacher-defined problems in meeting the demands of daily instruction. (…) Textbooks are also versatile. The textbook easily outstrips a movie projector or televised lesson for versatility in coping with the unpredictability of classroom life.

As seen so far, the very structure of the system establishes clear means and ends (transmitting information to pass evaluations), which in turn greatly conditions the methodology language teachers are able to apply in language class. Thus, TLT naturally emerges as teachers' way to cope with the complex demands and constraints of the system. By adopting "practical classroom routines and teaching methods, teachers have survived the acute, cross-cutting daily pressures of the classroom; that is, teachers have constructed a vocabulary to match the grammar of the classroom" (Cuban, 1986, p. 58).

In this sense, TLT can be regarded as the methodology by default of the system, for it represents the minimum methodological effort necessary for the system to operate. Quality of education may vary across institutions and countries, but as long as the syllabus is imparted and students pass their exams, the system is considered to be "working." Nonetheless, not all educators limit their teaching practice to the mere fulfillment of such basic rational functionality and technical requirements.

Even if circumstances may often be adverse, there are nowadays many teachers who try to incorporate in their language classes approaches more proximate to leading-edge methodologies (project-based learning, the communicative method, etc.) as well as the use of modern technologies. Nevertheless, the incorporation of innovative approaches is yet frequently subordinated to the logic of teacher-centered, textbook-based, and exam-oriented instruction; thus, lacking any genuine capacity to bring about education reform.

In other words, innovative methodologies are often either innocuous educational fads —which are no threat to the system—, or they are in fact transgressive; in which case they will be usually adapted and assimilated by the traditional teaching model, limiting their methodological revolutionary potential, turning said approaches into mere variations on traditional ways of language teaching. For instance, in the classroom, communicative approaches (e.g., role play, debates, etc.) tend often to be more about practicing the grammar

and vocabulary in the textbook than a real attempt at creating real opportunities for spontaneous and significant spoken and written interaction.

The case of technology-assisted methodology is also similar. Highly celebrated digital devices such as digital boards or tablets often become mere electronic mediums for doing the same old grammar drills already present in textbooks (activities such as matching columns, filling the gap exercises, true or false questions, etc.). Likewise, software like PowerPoint or websites like Kahoot or Genially are gamification tools that language teachers use to gamify or embellish the same kind of grammar/vocabulary exercises and explanations we have had in traditional textbooks for decades already.

In this sense, we must remain wary of appeals to novelty, whereby the use of technology is uncritically assumed to automatically foster abstract qualities in students such as learner autonomy, responsibility, lifelong learning, etc.:

> There is a strong and repeated tendency for the introduction of some new technology by enthusiastic "technicians" to be accompanied by a retrograde and unreflecting pedagogy. A grammar drill on a computer is still a grammar drill and if learners are given little choice (or no training, which comes to the same thing) then it is a travesty to call their programmes "self-directed". (Gremmo & Riley, 1995, p. 153)

Likewise, it is also worth pointing out that many of these technological pseudo-advancements have often failed even before being absorbed by the TLT model. As seen in Larry Cuban's book *Teachers and Machines: The Classroom Use of Technology since 1920* (1986) there is a long history of technicians promising educational utopias and failing to deliver them, as these were often poorly implemented.

Unsurprisingly, the use of new technological tools usually causes great conflicts with the functional rationality of traditional educational contexts. These contradictions show very well how the system's procedures are always more important than innovation or even the best interest of students. If a teaching approach does not fit within the rationale and demands of the educational assembly line, it will simply be impossible to implement said approach. As Cuban (1986, pp. 56–59) explains:

> Schools with self-contained classrooms, age-graded levels, standard class sizes, and uniform teaching loads are crafted instruments designed to cope with the mandate (…) within these overlapping school and classroom settings, the argument runs, teachers have rationed their time and energy to cope with conflicting and multiple demands and have constructed certain teaching practice that have emerged as resilient, simple, and efficient solutions in dealing with a large number of students in a small space for extended periods of time. Thus, the simplicity, versatility, and efficiency of those aids such as the textbook and chalkboard in coping with problems arising from the complicated realities of classroom instruction far exceed the limited benefits extracted from using machines.

Admittedly, there is some methodological value in trying to make traditional language teaching a bit more communicative, just like I also recognize that it is in good faith that teachers try to make their classes more palatable through digital gamification. However, we must make a clear distinction between "new ways of doing the same thing" and actually addressing the root of the problem.

In this regard, when teachers adopt these avant-garde methodologies and modern technologies as a mere complement or an add-on to the TLT model, they ultimately fail to (1) address the inherent structural problems with TLT, and (2) understand and take seriously the transforming methodological potential of said technological and methodological advancements—especially in critical terms, as it will be argued later on.

In conclusion, TLT can be understood as a teaching-learning methodology that is optimized to fulfill the most basic requirements set by the educational system: that is, to transmit information and make students pass their tests in the most effortless and cost-efficient way possible. Likewise, the need for managerial efficiency as well as its teacher-centeredness once again embodies a notion of scarcity, which reflects the material conditions of the epoch where the modern educational system was created.

At its worst, TLT would then be standardized, exam-oriented, teacher-centered, and textbook-based. Well-intended teachers may try to incorporate better approaches into their teaching practice, but usually never to the extent of really challenging this structural inner logic of the system. Now, this description of TLT may seem unnecessary to the reader, after all, we have all most likely experienced the TLT model in the flesh.

However, the point of this analysis is to argue that traditional language teaching is not just one more language teaching method among many others, but exceptional in that it was born together with and as a consequence of the modern nation-state. Thus, TLT is not just a methodological option, but the method by default of the industrial education system.

TLT is methodology reduced to its most basic technical functions, the bare minimum required for the assembly line to continue running; basic requirements which boil down to the linear transmission of information and making students pass exams. This is important because it means that as long as attempts for methodological innovation stay within the context and limitations set by formal education, these innovations will inevitably consist of simply mitigating the damning effects of TLT.

In this sense, understanding the historical and systemic reasons behind the operatory logic of the TLT model is crucial to assessing pedagogic practices from a critical perspective, as this allows us to see the systemic—and thus political—reasons that limit the capacity of educators to bring about truly ground-breaking teaching methodologies. Ultimately, real education reform must address these fundamental issues, which would have important philosophical, political, and ideological implications.

Information societies, the land of plenty

Since it is the product of the system, traditional language teaching has, despite its many flaws, survived till our days, and along with it, the old assumption that language and its means of instruction are vastly scarce resources. In line with Illich's critique, we see that most, if not all, language educational organizations today (both in the public and private sectors) legitimize their authority and old-fashioned methods on the basis of this perceived scarcity.

In a real sense, the way we today teach languages still denotes this deep-rooted idea that language teachers and educational institutions are the ones who must teach languages, for we still assume that they are the ones who monopolize foreign languages and the savoir-faire on how to teach them properly. Thus, learners are regarded as passive beings, ineluctably dependent on authority figures to be taught, being given materials, practice, assessment, etc. Nonetheless, this mindset becomes anachronic, counter-productive, and factually wrong in the context of our current globalized information societies.

Nowadays, at least in nations with a certain level of development, most people already live immersed in information. Nonetheless, the majority tend to live comfortably inside their information bubbles produced in their respective local tongues, never venturing into exotic linguistic territories. However, the potential is there. They are always one click away from accessing endless hours of online free input and practice in different languages. As long as these learners have access to the internet, they can start fully immersing themselves in new languages, something unprecedented in the history of language learning.

This easy access to free native input in most languages makes the information society a perfect historical period for language learning. Also, there is an ever-expanding offer and demand for inexpensive language learning materials, private tutors, and learning tools students can acquire to enhance or complement their learning process. To commensurate the

size of this industry, let us just consider the fact that for example, "the English language learning market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 6.2% from 2020 to 2027 to reach $54.92 billion by 2027" (Meticulous Research, 2021).

As a consequence, this abundance of both free and cheap access to learning resources means that traditional language educators have lost their de facto monopoly on language, and with it, a big part of their power as it has been traditionally constructed in our societies. Seeing this profusion of available learning materials, digital tools as well as free access to native content and speakers, we can logically conclude that scarcity is no longer a barrier for anyone with access to the internet, offline materials, or self-access centers that may help students by directly providing said materials or even by helping them find and manage online content, materials and learning tools.

In fact, most of the value that language teachers have traditionally passed down to students is already being provided by online teachers and content creators on the internet, largely for free and in exorbitant amounts. Having reached this point, let us now contemplate the multiplicity of resources learners can nowadays use to study and practice languages autonomously:

- Grammar: thousands of teachers upload to the internet written and audiovisual explanations of most grammar points in all major languages. Now, if having real online teachers teaching grammar for free was not enough, students can also borrow from libraries and self-access centers, buy, or sometimes even download for free all kinds of grammar reference books that come with comprehensive explanations and long lists of grammar exercises for drilling practice.

- Vocabulary: students can learn vocabulary simply through direct exposure to and study of native input. Nowadays, native content in major languages is ubiquitous online and mostly free in printed form (as in libraries or self-access centers) as well as in audiovisual form (on the internet, TV, radio, etc.). Furthermore, students can also do active study with free online vocabulary classes (on YouTube, blogs, websites, etc.), leveled readers, vocabulary boosters, dictionaries, using spaced repetition software such as Anki, etc.

- Phonetics (input & output): similar to the case of grammar, there are plenty of audiovisual and printed resources for learners to study phonetics and practice all aspects of it: pronunciation, intonation, stress patterns, etc. Besides, audio editing software and recording devices are nowadays easy to find. In fact, all phones can record, reproduce and even edit audio, making them a great tool to practice pronunciation alone. Of course, if we consider the possibility of practicing with people, it is also possible to find online language exchange partners who can help in a more personalized way.

- Passive language skills (input): Listening comprehension can be developed using leveled audio materials or by simply listening to many hours of interesting and comprehensible native content: YouTube videos, movies, series, music, podcasts, radio, etc. Likewise, learners can develop reading comprehension with the help of learning materials (such as leveled books, vocabulary boosters, etc.) or by simply spending enough time reading interesting content aimed at L1 speakers as well as learners (books, blogs, social media, news outlets, etc.).

- Active language skills (output): Given the interpersonal and communicative nature of language learning, teachers can still be of use to students, especially regarding writing, speaking, and spoken interaction skills. Nevertheless, there are still many alternatives available: online language exchange partners (to practice with and correct each other's mistakes), social media interaction, proofreading software (automatic and community-based), individual speaking practice with techniques such as shadowing, recording oneself speaking, etc. Moreover, if learners are willing to spend some money, they can for example travel abroad or get conversation practice from online language tutors or proofreaders whenever they feel necessary at very reasonable prices depending on the language.

In this small summary of freely available learning materials and tools, we can see how technology (the internet but also software) has vastly liberalized access to information and decentralized its distribution. The sociopolitical implications of this trend are remarkable:

nowadays, any motivated learner with access to the internet and basic computer literacy can potentially teach themselves any well-documented language.

Conclusion and discussion

In sum, we can observe that standardized language education as well as its traditional pedagogy are largely constructed on a historical notion of scarcity, which is no longer the reality of our modern information societies. Today, students are no longer dependent on institutions to access materials and learn languages, as the current abundance of available learning materials, native content, and tools makes learning a language to proficiency by autonomous means a feasible and rather inexpensive goal.

In this regard, self-access centers can also fulfill a key role as not only direct providers of learning resources, but especially as providers of mentorship and guidance for students on how to be autonomous as well as on how to access and manage properly this ocean of online resources brought about by our current information societies. Likewise, it would be beneficial to continue developing an understanding of self-access centers as meeting points for self-directed learners in order to foster a much more social and communal approach to autonomous learning.

Moreover, based on this analysis, I argue that TLT is not just another teaching methodology, but the methodology by default of the system, as it represents the minimal pedagogic effort necessary for the system to "work" and reproduce itself. Thus, methodologies that challenge the functional rationality of educational institutions are bound to either become assimilated by the TLT model or be discarded due to incompatibilities with the system.

Serious education reform must then challenge these core principles of the system, so the resulting new conditions of possibility may allow the implementation of methodologies more in tune with the reality of our information societies, fostering the development of learner autonomy, critical thinking, and lifelong learning.

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2.2. Toward a coherent critical theory of learner autonomy in language learning: Exploring its political implications in higher education and limitations in the literature

Reference:

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Note: On page 88 of this 2023 article, the term "anarchic" is used, but the intended meaning is "chaotic". These terms are not synonymous and should not be conflated.

In relation to the research objectives of this thesis, this second article aims:

(1) To present a coherent and nuanced theoretical framework for the critical practice of learner autonomy within the context of higher education.

(2) To address a significant research gap in the relevant literature by providing a clear definition of ALL that accounts for its political nature.

(3) To examine the long-standing depoliticization of ALL in the relevant literature, radicalizing a subfield that has remained stagnant and politically impotent for the past 20 years.

(4) To elucidate our political objectives and the necessary conditions of possibility for promoting innovative and critically aware approaches to ALL in higher education.

ABSTRACT

The literature on autonomous language learning reveals both, scholars' great enthusiasm for the revolutionary potential of learner autonomy as well as pessimism for its continual depoliticization within higher education. Similar to how 'learner autonomy' is still today an unfinished construct that raises considerable confusion among scholars, the critical theory of learner autonomy in the field of language learning remains largely unexplored; and thus, yet to be fully articulated. Building on the relevant literature, this article attempts to provide a coherent and nuanced theoretical framework for the critical practice of learner autonomy in higher education. Results show how the field of language learning is dominated by uncritical and apolitical approaches that render learner autonomy a politically impotent practice. Critical autonomous language learning must be both critically aware—so it can raise students' awareness of the structural and discursive constraints on their autonomy—and politically active—so it may lead to education reform and social change—, while also aiming at reaching the highest levels of institutional material support and student control possible.

Keywords: autonomy; higher education; language learning; critical theory

Introduction

Autonomy is a concept with a rich philosophical and political background that has been discussed and theorized about across many interrelated subfields in education. Having approached essentially the same construct from such a plethora of perspectives has made 'autonomy' an unclear and confusing concept for many researchers. However, this confusion is not just due to semantics, but to the fact that, 'so far, we have no theory of autonomous language learning' (Benson, 1996, p. 1).

Although definitions are often subjective, Holec (1981, p. 3) offers a very simple and rather uncontroversial definition of learner autonomy: 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. Unfortunately, this definition still fails to encompass the multifaceted nature of learner autonomy, which according to scholars, encompasses dimensions such as 'motivation, strategies, agency, identity, affect, self-esteem, self-direction, self-determination, self-regulation and self-efficacy' (Everhard & Murphy, 2015, p. 11).

Nonetheless, Benson (Benson & Voller, 1997, pp. 18–25) has argued that, in the literature, learner autonomy tends to be generally conceptualized and discussed from three key perspectives: positivism, constructivism, and critical theory.

1. Positivism—the most dominant approach in education today—argues that knowledge exists as an accurate reflection of objective reality, and so we can acquire it either by direct instruction or through the 'hypothesis-testing' model. Thus, it regards autonomy as 'the act of learning on one's own and the technical ability to do so' (1997, p. 25).

2. Constructivism argues that meaning is constructed via interaction with the environment and other people. Thus, it regards autonomy as 'the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning' (1997, p. 25).

3. Critical theory argues that knowledge is not neutral but always conditioned by relations of power and ideological discourses that represent the interests of different social groups. Thus, learning is understood as a 'process of engagement with social context which entails the possibility of political action and social change' (1997, p. 22). Autonomy is thus regarded as 'control over the content and processes of one's own learning' (1997, p. 25).

Even though it appears obvious that critical theory is the most political approach, the other two are far from neutral. In Benson's view, positivist and constructivist approaches are not only non-critical, but also pro-status quo, as they are associated with three key shifts in focus: a transition from 'situational to psychological, from social to individual, and from meaning-orientation to task-orientation' (1996, p. 30). These changes in perspective are very problematic for they depoliticize the concept of learner autonomy. Disregarding concerns about the situational or external aspects of learning reduces the practice of learner autonomy to a mere methodological, psychological, and personal matter.

Thus, autonomy becomes depoliticized, as students' success and failures are seen as the responsibility of students, which 'could easily be used to support political doctrines of non-intervention and self-reliance' (Benson, 1996, p. 30). In this same line, psychological approaches also promote individualism as it disregards the 'collaborative process of decision-making', which could promote 'social atomization and disempowerment' (1996, p. 30); as well as 'controlled independence'—feeling forced not to rely on others—rather than 'auton-

omous independence': choosing freely whether or not to relay on others, which allows for social learning and the fostering of relatedness (Little, 2007, p. 17).

Moreover, technical/psychological autonomy represents a shift in emphasis from 'questions about the purposes and content of language learning (why learners are learning languages and what they want to learn) to questions about methods (how they should go about learning)' (Benson, 1996, p. 31). In turn, this concern for methods makes us think of knowledge as something to learn, rather than meaning to be constructed through social interaction. Instead of questioning the purpose and content of language learning, we would then be emphasizing the search for 'the "best" processing techniques for a given set of linguistic skills or body of knowledge' (1996, p. 32).

In terms of student control, Holec's model of self-direction borders on autodidaxy, as students would take responsibility for the definition of objectives, selection of resources, methods and techniques, evaluation, and management (Holec et al., 1996, p. 83). Although highly autonomous, this definition lacks the kind of critical and political awareness that can be seen in Brookfield's political definition of self-direction learning as (1) control over what are considered legitimate learning activities and processes, and (2) the material conditions required to exercise self-directed learning (1993, pp. 232–233).

Benson (1996, pp. 32–33) agrees on the crucial importance of both control of the process as well as resources, and advocates raising students' critical awareness of institutional and resource constraints via a 'collective analysis of the social context of learning'. His position reflects a social approach to autonomous learning since he believes that 'control is a question of collective decision-making rather than individual choice' (1996, p. 33). Also, he problematizes 'language' as non-neutral, questioning linguistic authority figures (such as language experts or 'native speakers') as well as their claims of normative appropriateness. The objective is 'the negation of the teaching-learning distinction, or the transformation of the learner into a user or producer of language' (1996, p. 33).

A critical theory of autonomous language learning

My analysis will build on Benson's contributions—as his work leads the debate on critical autonomy within the field of language learning—while also revisiting the critical work of other eminent authors, intending to further explore what a coherent critical approach to

autonomous language learning can and should be in higher education. Let us start by defining what is meant by 'being critical'. Brian Fay explains that 'a critical theory wants to explain a social order in such a way that it becomes itself the catalyst which leads to the transformation of this social order' (1987, p. 27, as cited in Brookfield, 2005, p. 7).

This is the reason why, when discussing the politics of learner autonomy, we see very enthusiastic rhetoric. Leading scholar in adult education, Stephen Brookfield, considered it 'an oppositional, counter-hegemonic force' (1993, p. 229), while Allwright (1988, p. 35) has referred to it as a 'radical restructuring of our whole conception of language pedagogy, a restructuring that involves the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working'. In other words, learner autonomy is often expected to lead to big changes.

> From Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable. (Fisher, 2009, p. 17)

Nonetheless, this enthusiasm meets its counterpoint within the literature in the perpetual depoliticization of learner autonomy. In 1993, Brookfield asserted that self-direction—in principle, a mostly disruptive and transformative approach to learning—was already 'comfortably ensconced in the citadel, firmly part of the conceptual and practical mainstream' (1993, p. 227). In fact, he admitted that it is ironic how a concept 'seemingly so bound up with ideals of liberty and freedom as is self-direction can end up serving repressive interests' (1993, p. 239). Ever since, many critical authors have tried to revive the revolutionary character of SDL (Brookfield, 1993; Garrison, 1992; Mezirow, 1985), yet Benson says that these appear to have had little influence on the practice of autonomy in language learning (2001, p. 35).

Critical authors have often regarded autonomy as political per se. However, even though autonomy has political connotations, its practice is yet not necessarily as 'revolutionary' as usually made up to be. Let us say that you go to the library, pick up an Amharic grammar book, make some friends from Ethiopia, and after some time master the language without the supervision of any teacher; by the end of this fully autonomous learning experience, nothing about the education system will have changed politically or structurally. Likewise, if a student decides to become an autonomous learner within formal education, no

authority will oppose this either. As Wenden had already noticed in the nighties, 'encouraging learners to become more autonomous is a goal with which few language teachers would disagree' (1991, p. 11, as cited in Benson, 1996).

Similarly, one may learn English to proficiency without ever developing any critical awareness at all—staunch prescriptivists are a good example of this. Lacking political perspicacity is simply not a sine qua non for studying a language; after all, most L1 English speakers are not critically aware themselves. Likewise, millions of English students around the globe, for example, learn English completely decontextualized of any actual English-speaking culture. They do not understand the cultures of the target language, let alone the hidden language ideologies and structural injustices that condition their learning. Moreover, it is completely possible for students to learn languages autonomously and never feel the need to come together to engage in Benson's proposed 'collective decision-making': students' lack of class consciousness does not preclude them from simply studying on their own.

At its simplest, languages are tools, and just as a luthier may build an extraordinary guitar without ever questioning the meager salaries of the Brazilian workers who poached the endangered rosewood he now works with, students can learn a language without ever questioning the net of injustices and oppression that surrounds them. In light of these observations, I argue that—contrary to what Benson (1996), Brookfield (1993) among other scholars seem to suggest—it is not simply the case that learner autonomy enters the educational system being an inherently revolutionary practice only to then become depoliticized by an uncritical methodological implementation. Instead, I argue that autonomous language learning is not counter-hegemonic by itself: whether or not learner autonomy is actually 'revolutionary' comes down to our a priori political intentions and active political participation toward said revolution.

How can learner autonomy be made 'critical' then? In terms of control, learner autonomy only becomes political and critical when students' control over their own learning process clashes against the will of institutions and the market to control and extract value from said learning processes. Only when the pursuit or practice of learner autonomy involves methods that challenge the logic of capital and the educational assembly line is when the power struggle becomes most evident: there we are being critical. This implies a holistic opposition to economic pressures and material limitations on students' educational

freedom—poverty, austerity, neoliberalism in education and its ideologies of self-exploitation and credentialism (De Lissovoy, 2018)—as well as the downstream Fordism that is so much ingrained in educational institutions (i.e., the standardized, teacher-centered, textbook-based, exam-oriented linear transmission of knowledge; Betancor-Falcon, 2022).

When politicized in such manner, learner autonomy can then certainly constitute in itself a fugitive exploration of our educational freedom; an individual and collective search for alternatives; an act of resistance against the for-profit instrumentalization of our study time:

> Learning is compulsory debt: a promissory note on future valorization. Study, in contrast, resists a will to measure and extract. When one studies one enters into a practice of freedom, a creative and unpredictable labor of intensity. Study, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have argued, is a "fugitive" activity, a "general antagonism" that breaks with the sad passions of learning within the neoliberal university. Study is a refusal of learning and its biopolitics of academic labor, a means of escape, or "Ausgang," a restless agitation to know, think, and feel differently; to dwell otherwise in common with others. (Means, 2021, pp. 1–2)

Thus, from a critical perspective, learner autonomy must be understood as a philosophy that aspires to resist and challenge the status quo and conquer power in order to bring about socio-political change. Put simply, if we want to be critical, we must (1) envision a philosophical revolution—that is, an ideological shift that catalyzes change and envisions alternatives to traditional language teaching; (2) resist current systems of oppression—'exiting' them and so collectively reappropriating the surplus value of our learning (Virno, 2004, p. 70); and (3) pursuing education reform, a structural change that may allow and materially support students so they can take control. To illustrate what this critical educational movement could look like we can simply observe how critical gender theory, for example, is nowadays conducting its own ideological and political battles.

The theories of prominent scholars like Judith Butler (1990) have completely changed the political rhetoric of European and North American politics—the so-called 'culture wars'. Today, gender theory inspires crowds of people to question their assumptions about human gender, challenging gender normativity by making changes in their own life, and most importantly, by taking political action. As a decentralized philosophical and political movement, gender activists want to change society and see their philosophy reflected in legislation (see, e.g., Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021).

Although it is still meeting fierce opposition (Kao, 2021; Lavietes, 2022), we educators who believe in the importance of learner autonomy cannot even begin to imagine

a world where autonomous language learning could become half as socio-politically influential as gender theory is. Yet, the political and ideological struggle is essentially the same: theory about learner autonomy must become people's guide for changing how they teach and learn languages, and then unite in political action to promote this philosophy and demand education reform. So far, the closest we have to learner autonomy being 'trendy' are online language gurus and polyglots who establish themselves as a brand by creating language-related entertainment on YouTube; a trend that is far from being critical (see Bruzos, 2021).

Having discussed how critical theory requires personal, collective, and political action on the part of its supporters, let us explore how learner autonomy may be critically or uncritically practiced. If we follow Fay's definition of critical theory and Benson's theory of critical learner autonomy, we can conclude that two basic variables politicize language learning: 'political action', and 'critical awareness'.

- Political action: to engage in activism in order to bring about education reform which may allow students to take control over their own learning processes. This means directly challenging the educational system; a practice that may be conducted at different levels: from small individual and collective acts of resistance, fugitivity, exit, or exodus (Means, 2021), all the way to direct political action and civil disobedience, such as going to the streets to protest and demand education reform.

- Critical awareness: to engage in criticism of power relations and hegemonic ideologies in order to raise people's awareness of what structural and ideological factors limit their learning freedom. Of course, a critical theory of learner autonomy must be spread in society so as to discursively pave the way and gather support for the ultimate objective of achieving education reform.

Now, these two practices may be carried out in tandem, one but not the other, or not be implemented at all (Table 1). This leaves us with four logical possibilities that we can see represented in the following Punnett square:

Table 1. Types of learner autonomy.

	Politically active	Apolitical
Critically aware	Political and critical autonomy (PC)	Critical but apolitical autonomy (CA)
Uncritical	Political but uncritical autonomy (PU)	Uncritical and apolitical autonomy (UA)

Now, let us delve into the implications of each one of these quadrants:

- Political and critical autonomy: it actively questions dominant ideologies and engages in different forms of political action to raise social awareness and demand education reform. At a more personal level, supporters integrate the principles of learner autonomy into their lives as well as in their learning/teaching practice. They also encourage others to join this autonomous learning style, as well as to resist and question the industrial model of education and its teacher-centered methodologies.

- Political but uncritical autonomy: it seeks the institutional promotion of learner autonomy within the current education system. It values learner autonomy, but it is not concerned with matters of student control or critical awareness. If they obtained power, they would simply incorporate learner autonomy as a complement to conventional teacher-centered instruction.

- Critical but apolitical autonomy: it actively questions dominant ideologies from within the system, but this critical awareness never materializes into any concrete political movement. The criticism and debates may be enriching for teachers and students, but the conversation never reaches the mainstream. It remains stuck at the level of rhetoric within academic circles, and it is politically impotent.

- Uncritical and apolitical autonomy: it neither seeks any change in terms of control or education reform, nor promotes any kind of critical awareness. Autonomous learning is not necessary for the educational assembly line to operate as usual. However, since autonomy is a widely popular concept, autonomous learning may be incorporated into

teacher-centered instruction as a type of sporadic exercise, allowing students to do something on their own.

This Punnett square illustrates the four scenarios that logically follow from our definition of critical theory. Moreover, this theoretical framework maps perfectly well the different existing approaches to learner autonomy as well as the concerns expressed by scholars in the relevant literature. PC is the ideal critical approach to autonomous learning, whereby the practice of autonomy is simultaneous with ideological and socio-political activism. On the contrary, UA represents the reality of mainstream traditional language teaching, where both political action and critical awareness are non-existent, and autonomy is just regarded as a methodological variation on traditional modes of language instruction.

PU represents the type of advocacy of learner autonomy that completely lacks critical awareness. This is the type of technical and psychological approach to learner autonomy that Brookfield and Benson have warned us about: an approach that wants more autonomy but without any real structural or ideological change. Finally, CA represents those groups of intellectuals (usually within academia) who are well-versed in the theory and are very critical in their teaching practice, yet their activism is stuck at the level of rhetoric; a problem that is rather generalized in critical education.

Scholars have already described all kinds of hegemonic practices in language education such as native-speakerism, monolingualism (Bonfiglio, 2010; Paikeday, 2003), or linguistic discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997) among others; ideologies intimately connected to nationalism, colonialism, racism, sexism, neoliberalism, etc. In small academic circles, these topics are very much discussed, yet very few of these theories have so far materialized into any ground-breaking political movements or education reform. Consequently, the average language teacher today has never heard of these critical theories, let alone the general public.

The proposed theoretical framework illustrates how a critical approach to learner autonomy must be both critically aware and politically active in order to be considered truly counter-hegemonic. Learner autonomy without critical awareness is just homework (i.e., a task given to students to do on their own), and critical awareness without getting organized politically is just self-righteous theorizing. Regarding this lack of political engagement, it is

worth pointing out that in the literature of language learning we practically never see any mention of—much less calls for—any form of authentic political action as, for example, we can easily find in Henry Giroux's work (2014) against the threat of neoliberalism in education or Brookfield's work in the field of adult education:

> The point of theory is to generate knowledge that will change, not just interpret, the world. In this way, Horkheimer argues, critical theory truly qualifies for that most overused of adjectives, 'transformative'. There is no presupposition of theory being distanced from social intervention or political action. On the contrary, the converse is true. Critical theory requires such intervention. Its explicit intent is to galvanize people into replacing capitalism with truly democratic social arrangements. One important measure of the theory's validity, therefore, is its capacity to inspire action. (Brookfield, 2005, p. 26)

Political action such as 'getting organized', political campaigning, or non-violent direct action like sit-ins, strikes, rallies, or street performances are very common across all kinds of socio-political movements from feminism, anti-racism, and veganism to fundamentalist religious movements and political extremists, but never in critical learner autonomy. There might be multiple reasons for this, however, there is a recurrent idea in the literature that could explain this lack of political and social intervention. To illustrate this point, let us take an argument by Phil Benson (1996, p. 34) that perfectly embodies the issue at hand:

> Even a request as simple as this [students requesting a reduction in the assessed workload], if it is taken seriously, introduces an agenda of change. Because steps towards autonomy invariably problematize roles and power-relations, autonomization is necessarily a transformation of the learner as a social individual. In other words, autonomy not only transforms individuals, it also transforms the social situations and structures in which they are participants.

The last sentence says that the practice of autonomous learning not only changes individuals but can also change society and even political structures, an idea very close to the so repeated slogans and discourses that say that 'education can change the world'. This idea is simply wrong. As explained before, the mere individual practice of autonomous language learning or fostering of critical awareness cannot by themselves change larger society or higher-level political structures such as the education system. Real social and political change is achieved through political action, not language learning methodology. Closely related to this issue Brookfield (2005, p. 167) writes:

> "The fetishism of words is as dangerous in the realm of political ideology as it is in that of religious ideology" (1962, p. 159). Fromm feels that today words have become a substitute for concrete political action, so that making a speech is considered a significant act of social change. Yet language as a substitute for political intervention is illusory, allowing politicians to seem to be doing something when actually doing nothing. Words don't change the world, deeds do; "the idea which remains a word only changes words". (1962, p. 177)

I argue that, at the core of this misapprehension, there is a lack of understanding of cause and effect. In the Marxist tradition, it is explained that society can be divided into two realms, the base (or substructure) and the superstructure (Marx et al., 1972). The base stands for the mode of production (forces and relations of production), while the superstructure refers to the rest of social life not directly linked to production: the state, culture, traditions, religion, power structures, etc. According to Marx and Engels, the base shapes and maintains the superstructure, which ideologically reinforces –and can even shape—the base, albeit the base is always predominant (1972, pp. 294–296). In other words, many aspects of society are the result of a given underlying economic system.

According to dialectical materialism, the development of the nation-state led to the creation of educational institutions, which in turn led to the development of teaching methodologies that are ultimately a response to the needs and interests of the underlying economic system, capitalism. The industrial education model as well as its teacher-centered methodology are corollary developments of education under capitalism and not the other way around (Betancor-Falcon, 2022). Critical but apolitical approaches to learner autonomy can be mind-opening and enriching for students. If the teacher is in a position to delegate power to students, s/he may even be able to foster some localized autonomous learning within the current education system.

However, critical educators should not be surprised if the awareness they promote in the classroom remains helpless in the face of the influence and power of institutions and the market. Without the necessary political and social engagement, critical but apolitical approaches can at worst be seen as slacktivism, while at best an act of resistance. Undeniably, resistance is today very much necessary. Yet we should not forget that 'resistance' is a defensive strategy that reflects our impotency, unlike bold and proactive political action. Thus, I argue that a serious critical theory of learner autonomy must be both critically aware and politically active. Just as in the case of gender theory, it is important for theory to materialize into a political movement capable of changing social attitudes and forcefully demanding education reform.

Having asserted the importance of political action, we may wonder: 'how much student control is enough?'. Following Holec's argument in favor of 'full control by learners' and the development of autonomy 'through the practice of self-directed learning' (1980; 1985,

p. 180, as cited in Benson, 1996); as well as Benson's argument for more student control over the learning process, resources and language, we may come to the conclusion that, put simply, the more student control the better; and especially so in critical terms, as that makes learner autonomy all the more disruptive against teacher-centered modes of instruction.

This brings us back to the question of degree. As generally accepted in the literature, learner autonomy is best conceptualized as a spectrum, wherein on one extreme we would have zero student control and, on the other extreme, absolute control. Traditional teacher-centered education would represent zero control by students, while its logical opposite would necessarily have to be autodidaxy. Nonetheless, even if autodidacts are the ideal autonomous learner and they can also be critically aware and politically active, they do still fall outside of the purview of formal education (even if, for example, neoliberalism may still condition their studies); hence, conceptually outside of the kind of critical autonomy that we aspire to be teachable and applied within institutions (Figure 1).

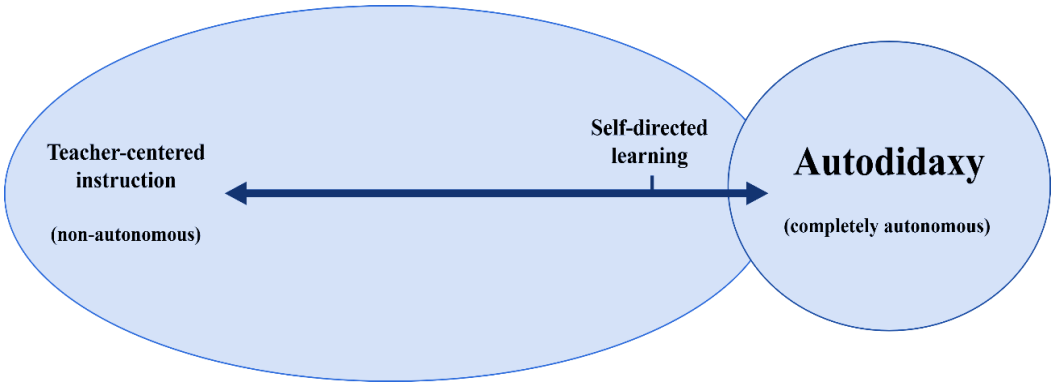

Figure 7 - Levels of student control within formal education

Within formal education, 'self-directed learning' is probably the closest approach to autodidaxy that there is. This is a term mainly used in the field of adult education and refers to learning that happens either completely outside of formal education or at least largely independent of the system, for example, learner training programs or other forms of guided highly autonomous learning. Since the distinction between 'self-direction' and 'autonomy' is often unclear, Benson (2001, p. 34) argues for the following definitions:

> Perhaps the most important distinction to be made in the field of language learning is between autonomy as an attribute of the learner and self-directed learning as a particular mode of learning in

> which the learner makes the important decisions about content, methods and evaluation. Autonomy can be considered as a capacity that learners possess to various degrees. Self-directed learning can be considered as something that learners are able to do more or less effectively, according to the degree that they possess this capacity.

Benson's definition takes zero account of the social and political aspects of education, being not only uncritical but also contradictory to his work of 1996 where he criticizes the depoliticization and reduction of autonomy to a technical and psychological capacity. If, as Benson points out, self-directed learning is the kind of learning that allows learners to make 'the important decisions about content, methods and evaluation', we must then conclude that a critical take on learner autonomy probably finds its epitome within formal education in self-directed learning, as this would imply student control over not just the process and content but even learning objectives and modes of assessment, while being materially supported and given mentorship by universities and self-access centers (see, e.g., Fernández-Toro, 1999).

Pursuing the highest level of autonomy possible is therefore a must. After all, 'controlled self-direction is, from a political perspective, a contradiction in terms, a self-negating concept as erroneous as the concept of limited empowerment' (Brookfield, 1993, p. 234). Irrespective of age, all students can benefit from greater freedom, yet what we mean by 'highest level of autonomy possible' will naturally vary across individuals and stages of education. In this sense, self-instruction may be considered particularly suitable for higher education, since older students tend to have more matured cognitive capacities and tools to conduct their learning process in more intentional, strategic, and systematic ways (Patterson, 2020; Syafiyah, 2011). The important thing, however, is to ensure that all students feel comfortable and supported as they progressively push their autonomy forward (Podolskij, 2012).

Having established that critical autonomy must be both critical and political, and also aspire to promote the highest levels of autonomy possible, we must now face the simple yet fundamental question of 'what do we want to be: reformers or revolutionaries?'. Confronting the educational system and ultimately seizing some institutional space where to practice high levels of autonomy would make us reformers. Reaching this goal would certainly be an extraordinary social conquest. However, in a critical sense, this would probably just mean

the establishment of a new institutional status quo where learner autonomy would be more tolerated, and thus once again become apolitical and uncritical.

Education reform could, for example, facilitate and normalize the practice of self-directed language learning in higher education, and this could potentially make people more autonomous than before in a practical sense. However, institutions as well as the purpose of education and learning would remain subjugated to the logic of capital. The logic of markets and their demand for an industrial model of education that can efficiently and relentlessly produce masses of useful workers for the market will not only be likely to perpetuate current institutions and methodologies, but also perpetuate the need for standardized instruction and evaluation, credentialism, and so on.

This means that a serious reading and coherent practice of critical theory do not allow us to stop our criticism at the institutional level; instead, it forces us to further challenge the underlying system that produced these very institutions in the first place. In other words, learner autonomy without a critique of today's neoliberal capitalism is tantamount to just reducing class time and increasing homework. Although capitalist realism often limits our imagination, the creation of the necessary material conditions for autonomous learning is rather straightforward, and thus many of our political objectives are already quite clear.

Firstly, higher education must be free (or at least low-cost) so everyone can access it regardless of their socio-economic background and students do not find themselves deep in crippling student debt (Wozniak, 2017). Fighting against the neoliberal privatization of education is a must, just as the demand for public infrastructure and free services that can support self-directed modes of collective language learning:

- Mentorship, guidance, and instruction so students can be taught how to be autonomous, as well as be constantly supported throughout their autonomous learning.

- Libraries and resource centers: places where to freely access learning materials, tools, and digital equipment.

- Public spaces and facilities for the collective, social, and communicative practice of language learning (Murray, 2018; Murray et al., 2017).

- Free or inexpensive official language level accreditation: as long as credentialism is imposed onto students, access to proficiency tests must be a right, not a for-profit business.

Conclusions and discussion

As has been shown, the critical practice of learner autonomy must aspire to give students as much control as possible over the most crucial aspects of their language-learning process. This further implies the desirable objective of promoting as high levels of learner autonomy as possible, as well as the corollary development of life-long learning. Consequently, this must lead us to consider approaches such as self-direction from the field of adult education, whereby university students would be legitimized to control the methods, content, modes of assessment, and objectives of their learning.

Moreover, since autonomous language learning may be practiced within or outside the current educational status quo without ever becoming a counter-hegemonical practice, learner autonomy is therefore not 'revolutionary' in itself. Learner autonomy can only be considered truly counter-hegemonic once we infuse its practice with a philosophical and political agenda of change. Thus, critical learner autonomy must be both critically aware and politically active. Critically aware so it can raise students' awareness of the institutional, structural, and discursive constraints on their personal autonomy, and politically active so theory can be materialized into different forms of political action that may lead to tangible education reform.

However, even if education reform was achieved and learner autonomy was commonly implemented, this social conquest could once again become accommodative and uncritical. By definition, critical theory forces us to go beyond the mere critique of institutionalized education and address its underlying substructure. Since the current industrial education model, as well as its traditional methodology, are both the consequence of an education system made for the interest and according to the logic of capital, we must keep in mind that it is capitalism that ultimately undergirds and conditions our entire concept of what education is and why we pursue it.

This means that critical education must also be critical of how neoliberal capitalism conditions and shapes language education. Likewise, this criticism must be concomitant with

political intervention in order to create the material conditions necessary for the development of learner autonomy: free or low-cost university education for all, material support, mentorship, social learning spaces, resource centers, etc. Without this critical awareness and political action at all levels of analysis, critical learner autonomy risks becoming nothing but promoting 'students doing homework on their own', instead of being a crucial element in new ways of conceptualizing language education.

Lastly, it is also worth pointing out that in my proposed theory and definition of critical autonomous language learning I do not claim to be approaching the subject from an objective Archimedean point; that is, as in from outside ideology itself. As the reader may have noticed by now, this analysis is materialist and critical. This constitutes a refreshing change from the conventional theories of learner autonomy found in the field of language learning which are largely based on metaphysical perspectives such as liberalism or humanism.

Nonetheless, this analysis is not materialist to the extent of falling into hardcore determinism. Even if social reproduction does exist, so does resistance, as well as the power of the multitude to shape sociopolitical reality. After all, 'capitalist command today may be dispersed into every realm of society but this also means that resistance to capitalism is now possible in every realm of society, not just in the "factory"' (Bourassa & Slater, 2022, p. 4). Likewise, I have also evaded determinism by tacitly accepting the existence of free will. Not doing so would simply defeat the point of talking about personal autonomy in the first place.

Thus, there is still the uncomfortable debate of whether 'personal autonomy' is an epistemologically valid concept, to begin with. Ultimately, when discussing the theory of learner autonomy, we must acknowledge the fact that our entire mainstream concept of personal autonomy and freedom rests upon mostly metaphysical concepts (such as the soul, the will, consciousness, etc.) that could be objectively false. After all, it could simply be the case that, as Spinosa argued:

> Men are mistaken in thinking themselves free; their opinion is made up of consciousness of their own actions, and ignorance of the causes by which they are conditioned. Their idea of freedom, therefore, is simply their ignorance of any cause for their actions. (1887 [1677], pp. 108, as cited in Nichols, 2015)

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2.3. Language self-immersion: Towards a critical theory of autonomous language immersion for a neoliberal digital age

Reference:

Betancor-Falcon, S. (2025). Language self-immersion: Towards a critical theory of autonomous language immersion for a neoliberal digital age. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2024.2448126

This third article was published in the Journal of *Studies in the Education of Adults* in January 2025. *Studies in the Education of Adults* is a Taylor & Francis journal, evaluated in ERIHPlus, and indexed in the Emerging Sources Citation Index (Clarivate) and Scopus (Elsevier), ranking Q2 in SJR and Web of Science with a 2023 CiteScore of 2.1. This journal also required adherence to British spelling conventions, which explains the change in spelling in this article.

In relation to the research objectives of this thesis, this third article aims:

(1) To offer a critical exploration of ALL beyond the context of formal education through an analysis of language self-immersion (LS).

(2) To make a significant theoretical and methodological contribution to the field of language learning, for it is the first work in the scholarly literature to provide a compendious exploration of LS.

(3) To examine this online phenomenon through a critical lens, demonstrating how discourse about ALL frequently commodifies it and intertwines it with problematic language ideologies and neoliberal rationality.

(4) To provide a counterpoint to my critique of formal education, as it provides a critical analysis of the virtues and dangers of self-learning languages in the privately owned

landscape of for-profit online platforms and through the unreflective consumption of media content.

El contenido de este artículo no se encuentra disponible debido a estar bajo embargo temporal por la revista científica.

The content of this article is not available because it is under a temporary embargo by the scientific journal.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In sum, this compendium of articles stands as a coherent and in-depth exploration of autonomous language learning, its politics, philosophy, and methodology. In addition, this thesis addresses long-standing lacunae in the scholarly literature, reinvigorating a field that has remained stagnant for the last two decades by introducing (1) a critically aware analysis of the origins and evolution of ALL throughout history [its past], (2) solutions to major gaps in the literature [its present], and (3) a coherent framework for the radicalization and promotion of learner autonomy within and without formal education, especially as currently practiced in online spaces [its future].

As a whole, this thesis marks a significant paradigm shift, laying the groundwork for an entirely new approach to conceptualizing learner autonomy and its role within contemporary educational practices. In what follows, I will proceed to answer the research questions guiding this thesis, with a summary of the principal contributions offered by each article.

1. What are the political and historical reasons behind the incompatibility of autonomous language learning with institutionalized language education? What new possibilities for the practice of ALL have emerged through the development of new technologies? What are the political implications of these changes?

In article 2.1, I contend that scarcity, defined as the lack of access to learning resources, sufficient language content, and supportive learning environments, has been the most determining factor in shaping the history of language education. This scarcity ultimately led to the emergence of institutionalized education, a system that imposes both structural limitations and discursive constraints on the implementation and promotion of innovative methodologies such as ALL.

Formal education is a system designed to efficiently instruct the masses and meet the demands of the labor market in a context of objective scarcity. To achieve this, mass education was modeled after industrial manufacturing, establishing clear technical and

bureaucratic procedures to instruct and evaluate students. This historical analysis already reveals two key insights.

Firstly, the educational system does not need to foster any student empowerment for it to simply "work": as long as some few basic technical procedures are done successfully, the whole educational apparatus can continue functioning as usual regardless of people's alienation or the actual degree of students' learning and long-term retention—let alone the development of more complex skills such as learner autonomy, critical thinking, or life-long learning.

Secondly, any methodologies that challenge the inherent logic of the system become extremely difficult—if not impossible—to implement. Contrarily, traditional language teaching (TLT) emerged from within the system as the methodology most capable of complying effectively with the system's requirements and procedures. In its purest form, TLT is characterized by being standardized, exam-oriented, teacher-centered, and textbook-based.

Despite some educators' efforts to innovate in their teaching practice, these attempts have so far failed to challenge the system's functional rationality and bring about education reform—at best only being able to mitigate some of the problems with TLT. As also argued in article 2.2, innovative methodologies are often either innocuous educational trends that pose no threat to the system, or they are truly transgressive. In the latter case, they are typically adapted and assimilated into the traditional teaching model, thereby limiting their revolutionary potential and transforming these approaches into mere variations of conventional language teaching methods.

Nonetheless, there are also discursive and ideological constraints on student agency that directly stem from this history and the system's rational functionality, helping legitimize it. Just like formal education, teacher-centeredness is also constructed around a historical notion of scarcity, since students have for centuries depended on teachers to learn languages. Thus, teachers have long been the monopolizers of (1) linguistic knowledge—as only they speak the language fluently—, (2) methodology—as only they know about methodology and control instruction—and (3) learning materials—as only they choose and provide what is to be studied and evaluated.

As can be seen, both the educational system and TLT legitimize themselves discursively on the basis of a notion of scarcity that is no longer the reality of our current

information societies. As explored in articles 2.1 and 2.3, the development of new information technologies has democratized knowledge, providing autonomous learners with a cornucopia of free and easily accessible materials, language content, and learning tools that students can base their entire self-learning journey on. Given this new reality, teacher-centredness can be argued to still survive mainly due to direct state imposition (via TLT, but also official certifications, etc.) and students' general lack of opportunities to develop learner autonomy, compounded by a scarcity mindset—even though, as shown in article 2.3, learning autonomy is starting to become popular and widely practiced in online spaces.

Moreover, this analysis challenges the widespread and unexamined assumption that TLT is simply a neutral methodology one may freely choose among many others. Contrarily, my critical analysis reveals TLT to not only be (1) a structural imposition and (2) a constraint on teachers' and students' educational freedom, but also (3) the methodology by default of the industrial education system—i.e., the minimum methodological effort necessary for the system to operate smoothly and reproduce itself. In sum, these first conclusions constitute a coherent historical and critical framework for understanding (1) the education system as inherently political and considerably contradictory to the principles of learner autonomy and (2) the democratisation of language education as a new material basis that opens up possibilities for methodological innovation and educational reform.

2. What is the reason behind the long-standing depoliticization of ALL in the relevant scholarly literature? What would a coherent critical theory of ALL look like? What are our political objectives and potential paths for the promotion of autonomous learning in institutionalized language education?

As previously discussed, the persistent depoliticization of autonomous language learning can be viewed as part of the broader depoliticization of language education as a whole and the result of the systemic and discursive constraints that traditional language teaching imposes on methodological innovation. Nonetheless, to answer this second set of questions, I will now focus on the critical literature of ALL, seeking to understand why it has remained stagnant and impotent for over 20 years. In article 2.2, I identified two key shortcomings in the relevant literature.

Firstly, critical scholars in the field have been mistaken in assuming that the mere practice of ALL would be sufficient to spark an educational revolution. Although learner autonomy is inherently political, it is not revolutionary per se, as that depends on whether or not we take political action. Even if formal education limits the promotion of learner autonomy, few educators will oppose autonomous study, especially when serving as a complement to formal instruction—in fact, most will probably praise and recommend it. Likewise, students can study languages autonomously and never challenge or even become aware of any of the forces hindering their educational freedom—as can be seen in examples provided in article 2.2, but also in the uncritical practice of self-immersion in online spaces explored in article 2.3.

Secondly, scholars and educators often fail to be critically aware and politically active in their practice and defense of ALL. In article 2.2, I argued that a coherent theory and practice of ALL from a critical perspective must be both critically aware and politically active—an approach that questions dominant ideologies and engages in different forms of political action to raise critical awareness and demand education reform. At a more personal level, supporters integrate the principles of learner autonomy into their lives as well as in their learning/teaching practice. They also encourage others to join this autonomous learning style, as well as to resist TLT.

Nonetheless, educators and theorists often fall into one of three categories: (1) completely indifferent to ALL, (2) politically engaged but uncritical—advocating for autonomy without challenging the status quo, or (3) critically aware but apolitical—questioning dominant narratives without ever taking concrete political action to reform the system.

Likewise, I have argued that a coherent critical practice of ALL must strive to foster the highest levels of autonomy possible. Additionally, this political and critically aware approach must also involve a holistic opposition to economic pressures and material limitations on students' educational freedom—poverty, austerity, neoliberal education and its ideologies of self-exploitation and credentialism—as well as the pervasive influence of Fordism in formal education.

In outlining our political objectives, I have also argued for higher education to be free (or at least affordable), thus ensuring accessibility for individuals from all socio-economic

backgrounds and preventing students from falling into crippling debt. Likewise, we must advocate for the development of public infrastructure and free services that support self-directed language learning: (a) mentorship, guidance, and instruction to teach students how to become autonomous, while providing continuous support throughout their autonomous learning journey; (b) libraries and resource centers: places where to freely access learning materials, tools, and digital equipment; (c) public spaces and facilities for the collective, social, and communicative practice of language learning; and (d) free or inexpensive official language level accreditation—because as long as credentialism is enforced on students, access to proficiency must be a right, not a profit-driven industry.

3. What is language self-immersion? What are the potential dangers of full language learner autonomy on the internet? What does this methodology—as it is currently practiced in online spaces—reveal about the political nature of ALL and its practice both within and outside formal education?

Article 2.3 contributes to the field of language learning by providing a first-ever scholarly exploration of language self-immersion (LS), a popular online approach to ALL that combines the methodological benefits of language immersion with the principles of highly autonomous lifelong learning. Language self-immersion can be understood as the deliberate attempt of language learners to undergo self-induced long-term and intensive exposure to the target language, especially through massive consumption of media content.

Language self-immersion reveals itself to be a rather heterogeneous and flexible approach under the umbrella of autonomous language learning which is (1) mostly technology-assisted—formal instruction also being an optional source of practice and input—, (2) considerably guided—as autonomous learners do in fact seek learning advice from online influencers and scholars—and (3) not just limited to input-based immersion, for skill building is also a possibility, and often a necessity.

Apart from this theoretical and methodological contribution, I also examined this online phenomenon through a critical lens, demonstrating how discourse about ALL frequently commodifies it and intertwines it with problematic language ideologies and neoliberal rationality. This analysis reveals how, even if critical authors often concentrate

their criticism on the oppressive nature of institutionalized education, we must not assume that escaping formal education would directly result in learner empowerment. Since today's practice of LS is anchored on the massive consumption of internet media content, we must recognize that online spaces are far from neutral.

In fact, online platforms are private spaces with a significant economic interest in colonizing and managing netizens' time, data, mental health, and digital labor through numerous means. Likewise, as argued in articles 2.2 and 2.3, ALL can be successful in terms of methodology and learning results, and yet, remain thoroughly acritical. In fact, discourse about ALL that reduces its practice to the massive consumption of media content risks portraying any kind of non-educational content as an excellent source of language exposure and practice.

Even if one may learn their target language by consuming endless hours of disinformation and frivolous entertainment, this is not conducive to the development of educated critical thinkers. Put bluntly, one can reach a C2 level in their target language and yet have nothing intelligent to say in it. Thus, whether within or without formal education, it is important that the practice of highly autonomous learning is accompanied by the development of critical thinking skills, which can only be acquired through the study of scientific knowledge, edifying content, and philosophical reflection.

These observations demonstrate that there are no neutral educational spaces. Since the private sector is primarily profit-driven and full autonomy can make learners vulnerable to the issues discussed above, it is imperative that our critical theory and practice of autonomous language learning strive to secure their rightful place within the public sector; hence the need for education reform, ensuring that formal education aligns with the reality of our contemporary information societies and prioritizes student autonomy and emancipation as its raison d'être.

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RESUMEN EN ESPAÑOL

La bibliografía académica sobre el aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas (AAI) rebosa de entusiasmo ante el potencial transformador que esta práctica encierra. Stephen Brookfield, eminente estudioso del campo de la educación en adultos, lo describió como «una fuerza opositora y contrahegemónica» (1993, p. 229), una idea que resuena con la contundente afirmación de Allwright (1988, p. 35), para quien el AAI suponía «una reestructuración radical de toda nuestra concepción de la enseñanza de idiomas, una reestructuración que implica el rechazo de la enseñanza tradicional y la introducción de formas completamente nuevas de trabajo». Así pues, son muchos los que han teorizado la autonomía del alumno como una metodología disruptiva y transgresora.

Sin embargo, aunque la autonomía es un concepto inherentemente político, la bibliografía académica sobre el aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas la ha despojado en gran medida de su carga ideológica, reduciéndola a un mero recurso metodológico. Esta despolitización no ha pasado desapercibida para aquellos académicos afines a la teoría crítica, quienes han manifestado su inquietud ante el continuo fracaso en radicalizar el AAI y así poder convertirlo en una metodología capaz de desafiar y trascender los modelos tradicionales de enseñanza y aprendizaje de idiomas (Benson, 2001, p. 35; Brookfield, 1993, pp. 227–239).

Benson y Voller (1997, pp. 18–25) han señalado que la bibliografía sobre el aprendizaje autónomo ha tendido a institucionalizar y neutralizar la autonomía del alumno, ya que la reducen a (desde el positivismo) «el acto de aprender por cuenta propia y la habilidad técnica para hacerlo» o a (desde el constructivismo) «la capacidad psicológica interna para autodirigir el propio aprendizaje», sin considerar la perspectiva de la teoría crítica, que concibe la autonomía como una cuestión de «control sobre el contenido y los procesos de su propio aprendizaje».

Por si esto fuera poco, Benson (1996, p. 1) advierte que el AAI sigue siendo un concepto teóricamente incompleto, lo que genera confusión entre muchos investigadores del campo. Esta situación deja en evidencia la ausencia de una teoría que examine en profundidad las implicaciones políticas del AAI. Así pues, nos encontramos ante una laguna de conocimiento que no solo merece ser atendida, sino que constituye una oportunidad única para contribuir de manera significativa al campo de la enseñanza de idiomas.

Esta tesis doctoral por compendio de artículos titulada *El aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas desde una perspectiva crítica: La política de aprender lenguas a tu manera*, se inscribe en la tradición de la teoría crítica y aspira a sentar las bases de una teoría crítica del aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas. Esta empresa intelectual indaga en la historia, la política y la filosofía del AAI desde una perspectiva crítica, desentrañando y analizando con ojo crítico los factores materiales y las narrativas dominantes que han condicionado su desarrollo, y ofreciendo a su vez una brújula conceptual que oriente tanto nuestros objetivos políticos como las estrategias adecuadas para alcanzarlos.

Porque, si como aquí se sostiene, el aprendizaje de idiomas es también un acto político, resulta imprescindible reconocer su dimensión emancipadora y defender modelos educativos que privilegien la autonomía del estudiante frente a los rígidos esquemas institucionales que, más que estimular, a menudo sofocan no solo el aprendizaje, sino también el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico, la autonomía del alumnado y su capacidad de aprendizaje continuo a lo largo de la vida.

Con este propósito, la presente tesis se articula en torno a tres bloques de preguntas clave, cuyas respuestas no solo buscan demostrar la naturaleza política del aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas, sino también desafiar las limitaciones impuestas por la educación institucionalizada, concebir nuevas posibilidades metodológicas y abrir nuevas vías de investigación y activismo político.

1. ¿Qué factores históricos y políticos explican la incompatibilidad entre el aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas y las metodologías tradicionales de la educación institucionalizada de idiomas? ¿Qué nuevas posibilidades para la práctica del AAI han surgido a partir del desarrollo de las nuevas tecnologías? ¿Cuáles son las implicaciones políticas de estos cambios históricos?

2. ¿Por qué la bibliografía académica ha insistido en despojar al AAI de su carga política? ¿Cómo sería una teoría crítica coherente que restituyera su verdadero potencial revolucionario? ¿Qué objetivos políticos deberían guiar su desarrollo y qué estrategias podrían emplearse para integrarlo en los sistemas educativos sin que pierda su esencia emancipadora?

3. ¿Qué es la autoinmersión lingüística? ¿Qué riesgos presenta el estudio completamente autónomo de idiomas en internet? ¿Qué nos revelan estas prácticas —tal como toman lugar en espacios virtuales— sobre la dimensión política del AAI y su papel dentro y fuera de la educación formal?

Estas preguntas no son meros ejercicios especulativos, sino el punto de partida de una reflexión profunda que aspira a cuestionar las estructuras establecidas y a imaginar un aprendizaje de idiomas que no solo forme hablantes, sino que también eduque sujetos críticos, capaces de tomar las riendas de su propio aprendizaje y, en el camino, transformar la sociedad misma. Con el fin de responder mis preguntas de investigación, esta tesis se fundamenta en la teoría crítica.

Esta es una corriente filosófica que busca examinar y problematizar las estructuras de poder, las ideologías, así como los supuestos tácitos que moldean nuestra realidad, con el fin último de desvelar los entresijos del poder, denunciar la injusticia social y fomentar una toma de conciencia emancipadora que nos permita resistir las lógicas de dominación y sus consecuentes injusticias. En cada artículo empleé distintas metodologías críticas, entre las cuales podemos distinguir (1) el análisis crítico, (2) la genealogía, y (3) el análisis crítico del discurso de una muestra cualitativa.

Mi primer artículo, titulado *Una historia crítica del aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas: Desvelando la resistencia institucional y estructural contra la innovación metodológica en la enseñanza de lenguas*, ofrece un análisis crítico de la historia y evolución de la educación reglada de idiomas, el cual desvela los factores sistémicos y materiales que impiden la innovación metodológica y han limitado el desarrollo del aprendizaje autónomo y permanente.

En este artículo, sostengo que la escasez —concebida como la carencia de recursos de aprendizaje, la falta de contenido lingüístico adecuado y la ausencia de entornos adecuados para el estudio— ha sido el factor que más ha condicionado la historia del aprendizaje y la enseñanza de lenguas. Es precisamente esta escasez la que, a la postre, condujo al advenimiento de la educación institucionalizada, un sistema que impone tanto limitaciones estructurales como discursivas a la implementación y promoción de metodologías innovadoras como el AAI.

La educación institucionalizada fue concebida como mecanismo para instruir de manera eficiente a las masas y responder a las exigencias del mercado laboral en un contexto de escasez objetiva. Para alcanzar este fin, la enseñanza de masas se modeló a semejanza de la producción industrial, estableciendo procedimientos técnicos y burocráticos bien definidos para instruir y evaluar a los estudiantes. De entrada, este análisis histórico nos ofrece dos revelaciones fundamentales.

En primer lugar, el sistema educativo no necesita fomentar la autonomía del estudiante para, simplemente, seguir funcionando. Su operatividad no depende de que se empodere a los alumnos, ni tampoco de su involucramiento real en el proceso de aprendizaje, sino de la aplicación eficaz de ciertos procedimientos técnicos básicos (asistir a clase, cumplir tareas, pasar exámenes, etc.).

Siempre que estos procedimientos se implementen correctamente, la maquinaria educativa habrá cumplido su cometido y será considerada exitosa, independientemente de la alienación de quienes la habitan, y sin preocuparse demasiado por el grado real de retención a largo plazo del conocimiento y, mucho menos, por el desarrollo de habilidades más complejas como la autonomía del alumno, el pensamiento crítico o la capacidad de seguir aprendiendo a lo largo de la vida.

En segundo lugar, cualquier metodología que desafíe esta lógica inherente del sistema se enfrenta a enormes dificultades —cuando no a una imposibilidad absoluta— para ser implementada. La enseñanza tradicional de lenguas (ETL), por el contrario, emergió de las entrañas del propio sistema como la metodología que mejor se ajusta a sus exigencias y procedimientos. En su forma más pura, la ETL se define por su carácter estandarizado, su concepción de los exámenes como fin último, su estructura centrada en el docente y su dependencia de los libros de texto.

Si bien muchos educadores intentan innovar en su práctica docente, estos intentos raramente llegan a desafiar la racionalidad funcional del sistema, y mucho menos a reformarlo. En el mejor de los casos, estos intentos solo sirven para paliar algunas de las deficiencias de la ETL. Por ejemplo, las llamadas «metodologías innovadoras» suelen caer en una de dos categorías: o bien son meras modas pedagógicas inocuas e incapaces de representar una amenaza para el sistema, o bien poseen un carácter verdaderamente transgresor. En este último caso, lo que ocurre con frecuencia es que estas terminan siendo asimiladas y adaptadas al modelo tradicional, lo que las desposee de su potencial revolucionario y las convierte en simples variantes de los métodos convencionales de enseñanza de idiomas.

Asimismo, existen restricciones discursivas e ideológicas que también limitan la autonomía del aprendiente. Este paradigma deriva de la noción de la escasez histórica y la lógica funcional del sistema, y contribuye a la legitimación del sistema educativo y su pedagogía, presentándolos como necesarios, racionales e inevitables. Al igual que la educación formal, el modelo de enseñanza centrado en el profesor responde a esta misma idea de escasez, ya que los estudiantes han dependido por siglos de sus maestros para aprender idiomas.

Históricamente, los profesores de idiomas han monopolizado tres elementos esenciales del proceso educativo: (1) el conocimiento lingüístico —pues solo ellos dominaban la lengua meta—, (2) su metodología —pues solo ellos poseían el saber pedagógico y el control sobre la enseñanza— y (3) los materiales de aprendizaje —pues solo ellos determinan qué se ha de estudiar y cómo se evalúa.

Como puede verse, tanto el sistema educativo como la enseñanza tradicional de lenguas se legitiman discursivamente en base a una noción de escasez histórica que ya no refleja la realidad actual de nuestras sociedades de la información. Tal y como se explora en mi primer y tercer artículo, el desarrollo de las nuevas tecnologías de la información ha democratizado el acceso al conocimiento, proporcionando a los autodidactas una cornucopia de materiales gratuitos y fácilmente accesibles, así como contenido lingüístico y herramientas de aprendizaje con las que pueden aprender idiomas por sí mismos.

Ante esta nueva realidad, se podría argumentar que, si bien el modelo de enseñanza centrado en el docente sobrevive y se mantiene hegemónico, esto se debe principalmente a

(1) la imposición directa del Estado (a través de la ETL, pero también de certificaciones oficiales, etc.), (2) a la escasez de oportunidades para que los estudiantes desarrollen su autonomía y (3) la consecuente mentalidad de escasez que les hace dependientes de sus profesores —aunque, como se demuestra en mi tercer artículo, el aprendizaje autónomo está empezando a ganar popularidad en internet.

Además, este análisis desafía la asunción acrítica y enormemente extendida de que la ETL no es más que una metodología neutral entre tantas otras y entre las cuales uno puede elegir libremente. Mi análisis crítico revela que la ETL no solo es (1) una imposición estructural y (2) una restricción de la libertad educativa de docentes y estudiantes, sino también (3) la metodología por defecto del sistema educativo industrial —es decir, el mínimo esfuerzo metodológico necesario para que el sistema funcione de manera normal y pueda reproducirse a sí mismo.

Estas primeras conclusiones constituyen un marco histórico y crítico que nos permite comprender el sistema educativo como inherentemente político y fundamentalmente contradictorio con los principios de la autonomía del alumno. Como ya se ha señalado, la persistente despolitización del aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas no es un fenómeno aislado, sino parte de un proceso más amplio de despolitización de la enseñanza en su conjunto, resultado de las restricciones sistémicas y discursivas que la enseñanza tradicional impone sobre cualquier intento transgresor de innovación metodológica.

Sin embargo, para responder a mi segundo conjunto de preguntas, centraré ahora la atención en la bibliografía académica y crítica sobre el aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas, con el objetivo de comprender por qué esta ha permanecido estancada e impotente durante más de dos décadas. En mi segundo artículo titulado *En busca de una teoría crítica coherente de la autonomía del alumno en la enseñanza de lenguas: Sus implicaciones políticas en la educación superior y limitaciones en la bibliografía académica*, identifiqué dos problemas fundamentales en la bibliografía relevante.

En primer lugar, los académicos a menudo han asumido erróneamente que la mera práctica del aprendizaje autónomo sería condición suficiente para detonar una revolución educativa. Si bien la autonomía del alumno es un concepto inherentemente político, este no se puede considerar revolucionario en sí mismo. De hecho, son pocos los docentes que se oponen abiertamente al aprendizaje autónomo o que lo ven como una práctica subversiva. La

autonomía del alumno es un concepto popular en el campo de la enseñanza de idiomas y que generalmente se considera deseable. Asimismo, la autonomía no se suele percibir como una pedagogía subversiva o controversial, pues esta siempre se despolitiza y a menudo se usa como complemento a la enseñanza tradicional.

Además, el aprendizaje autónomo no es revolucionario per se, en tanto en cuanto un estudiante puede aprender un idioma de manera autónoma sin jamás cuestionar o siquiera tomar consciencia de las fuerzas que restringen su libertad educativa, como puede observarse en los ejemplos presentados en mi segundo artículo y también en la práctica acrítica de la autoinmersión lingüística en espacios digitales, analizada en el tercer artículo.

En segundo lugar, tanto académicos como docentes suelen carecer de una conciencia crítica y de un compromiso político real en la defensa del aprendizaje autónomo. En mi segundo artículo, sostengo que una teoría y práctica coherente del aprendizaje autónomo desde una perspectiva crítica debe ser consciente y combativa: un enfoque que cuestione las ideologías dominantes y, al mismo tiempo, promueva distintas formas de acción política orientadas a generar conciencia social y exigir una reforma educativa. A nivel personal, quienes defienden esta postura han de integrar los principios de la autonomía no solo en su práctica docente, sino también en su propia vida, ejerciéndola, promoviéndola activamente, e invitando a otros a sumarse a este estilo de aprendizaje y, sobre todo, resistiendo la enseñanza tradicional de lenguas.

No obstante, tanto educadores como académicos suelen caer en una de tres categorías: (1) la indiferencia absoluta ante el aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas, (2) el compromiso político sin conciencia crítica —es decir, la defensa de la autonomía sin cuestionar el statu quo— o (3) la lucidez crítica desprovista de acción política —el análisis de las narrativas dominantes sin que esa toma de conciencia se traduzca jamás en una lucha efectiva por la transformación del sistema.

Igualmente, sostengo que una práctica crítica coherente del aprendizaje autónomo debe aspirar a fomentar los más altos niveles de autonomía posibles. Además, esta estrategia, al mismo tiempo crítica y combativa, debe implicar también una oposición frontal contra aquellas presiones económicas y restricciones materiales que socavan la libertad educativa de los estudiantes: la pobreza, las políticas de austeridad, el modelo de educación neoliberal

y sus ideologías de autoexplotación y credencialismo, así como la persistente influencia del fordismo en la enseñanza formal.

En la formulación de nuestros objetivos políticos, he defendido que la educación superior debe ser gratuita —o, al menos, accesible— para garantizar la equidad y evitar que los estudiantes caigan en deudas impagables (véase el caso de los EE. UU.). Asimismo, debemos abogar por el desarrollo de una infraestructura pública y de servicios gratuitos que respalden el aprendizaje autónomo de lenguas: (a) mentoría, orientación e instrucción para enseñar a los estudiantes a convertirse en aprendientes autónomos, brindándoles apoyo continuo a lo largo de su aprendizaje; (b) bibliotecas y centros de recursos, donde se ofrezca acceso libre a materiales de aprendizaje, herramientas y equipos digitales; (c) espacios públicos y equipamiento que favorezcan la práctica colectiva, social y comunicativa del aprendizaje de idiomas; y (d) acreditación oficial de competencias lingüísticas gratuita o de bajo costo, ya que, mientras el credencialismo siga siendo una imposición, el acceso a las certificaciones de nivel debe ser un derecho, no un negocio.

Finalmente, mi tercer artículo, titulado *La auto-inmersión lingüística: En busca de una teoría crítica de la inmersión autónoma en idiomas para una era digital neoliberal*, presenta una perspectiva inédita en el campo del aprendizaje autónomo de lenguas al ofrecer la primera exploración académica del fenómeno de la autoinmersión lingüística, una metodología en auge dentro del aprendizaje informal de lenguas que combina los beneficios metodológicos de la inmersión lingüística con los principios del aprendizaje autónomo y permanente.

La autoinmersión lingüística puede entenderse como el intento deliberado del aprendiente de autosometerse a una exposición prolongada e intensiva al idioma meta, especialmente a través del consumo masivo de contenido multimedia. Este se revela, por lo tanto, como una metodología heterogénea y flexible dentro del campo del AAL, caracterizada por (1) basarse mayormente en el uso de tecnología —siendo la instrucción formal también un recurso opcional para practicar y exponerse al idioma—, (2) ser hasta cierto punto guiada —pues los aprendientes autónomos buscan consejos metodológicos de *influencers* y académicos en internet— y (3) no limitarse únicamente a la inmersión pasiva en el idioma, ya que el estudio activo de este (su gramática, vocabulario, etc.) no solo es opcional, sino que en muchos casos también necesario.

Aparte de esta contribución teórica y metodológica al campo, en este artículo también examino dicho fenómeno desde una perspectiva crítica, demostrando cómo el discurso en torno a la autoinmersión lingüística frecuentemente la mercantiliza y la contamina con ideologías lingüísticas problemáticas y racionalidad neoliberal. Este análisis pone de manifiesto que, si bien los autores críticos suelen concentrar su crítica en la naturaleza opresiva de la educación institucionalizada, no se debe asumir ingenuamente que el estudio autónomo fuera del sistema educativo sea automáticamente emancipador o liberador.

La práctica contemporánea de la autoinmersión lingüística se basa principalmente en el consumo masivo de contenido multimedia en plataformas virtuales que están lejos de poder ser consideradas como «neutrales». En realidad, las plataformas en línea son espacios privados con un considerable interés económico en colonizar y gestionar el tiempo, los datos, la salud mental y el trabajo digital de sus usuarios por múltiples vías. Asimismo, como sostengo en mi segundo y tercer artículo, el AAL puede ser exitoso en términos metodológicos y de resultados de aprendizaje sin dejar de ser, al mismo tiempo, una práctica profundamente acrítica. En efecto, la reducción del AAL al simple consumo masivo de contenido multimedia conlleva el riesgo de presentar cualquier tipo de material, por banal o desinformativo que sea, como una fuente valiosa de aducto y educto lingüístico.

No es exagerado afirmar que, hoy en día, un autodidacta podría alcanzar un nivel C2 en su idioma meta tras consumir interminables horas de desinformación y entretenimiento frívolo en internet, sin que ello se acompañe del desarrollo de un pensamiento crítico maduro. Dicho sin rodeos: uno puede aprender a hablar con fluidez y precisión una nueva lengua sin llegar nunca a tener nada inteligente que decir en ella. De ahí la importancia de que el aprendizaje autónomo, ya sea dentro o fuera del ámbito institucional, se acompañe del desarrollo del pensamiento crítico, el cual solo puede cultivarse mediante el estudio riguroso de conocimiento científico, el consumo de contenido edificante y una constante reflexión filosófica y crítica.

Estas observaciones nos llevan a una conclusión ineluctable: no existen espacios educativos neutrales. Dado que el sector privado se rige por la lógica del capital y que una autonomía total puede hacer a los aprendientes vulnerables a las problemáticas ya descritas, nuestra teoría y práctica crítica del AAL debe reivindicar su lugar legítimo dentro del sector público. De ahí la urgencia de una reforma educativa que armonice la enseñanza formal con

la realidad de las sociedades de la información y que consagre la autonomía y la emancipación del estudiante como su razón de ser.

En suma, este compendio de artículos constituye una exploración coherente y profunda del aprendizaje autónomo de lenguas, así como su dimensión política, filosófica y metodológica. Asimismo, esta tesis aborda lagunas de larga data en la literatura académica, revitalizando así un campo de investigación que ha permanecido estancado durante las últimas dos décadas.

Esto se ha conseguido mediante (1) un análisis crítico de los orígenes y la evolución del aprendizaje autónomo de idiomas a lo largo de la historia [su pasado]; (2) soluciones a las principales lagunas de conocimiento y contradicciones en la bibliografía académica relevante [su presente]; y (3) un marco teórico coherente para la radicalización y promoción de la autonomía del estudiante tanto dentro como fuera de la educación formal, especialmente en lo que respecta al aprendizaje autónomo en línea y en espacios digitales privados [su futuro].

En su conjunto, esta tesis representa un cambio radical de paradigma, el cual sienta las bases para un enfoque completamente nuevo en la conceptualización y práctica de la autonomía del estudiante, así como su papel en el desarrollo de nuevas metodologías de aprendizaje y enseñanza de idiomas en el contexto actual de nuestras sociedades de la información.