Foreword

Having successfully embarked on the year 2000, symbol of undreamt of human progress and scientific advances, we want to devote the latest issue of *Links and Letters* to a very innovative and leading topic: *Autonomy in second language learning*. No other theme could have reflected the educational, social and technological changes that have taken place in the field of language teaching over the past century. A look at today's society reveals that current educational goals and methodological practices have become increasingly centered around the learner and on his/her particular needs and objectives. These individual needs have fostered the flexibility of educational programs in terms of time, location, method and materials, and the emergence of tailor-made and self-directed learning schemes, seen as necessary alternatives to traditional teaching; finally, information technology has been put at our service, offering the necessary tools (video recorders, satellite television, Internet and other computer applications) and materials (audio and video tapes, CD-ROMs, hypermedia) to set up self-access and resource centers, and to implement other self-instruction learning schemes, including distance and open learning programs.

Common to these changing patterns in language education is the perceived need to give more autonomy to the learner. Following Holec's (1981) characterization of 'ideal autonomous learners', they willingly assume full responsibility for their own learning; that is, they are able to determine what, how, when and with whom to learn; become aware of their individual needs and set objectives accordingly; monitor and evaluate the progress made, which they use as the basis in planning further learning. Moreover, by learning how to learn they ensure a permanent education, which allows them to learn independently from teachers, specific methods or materials. It comes as no surprise, then, that nowadays learner autonomy is not only perceived as a major goal but as a social and educational priority.

Learner autonomy, however, does not presuppose a specific methodology or context. As a matter of fact, it can be fostered in manifold ways and settings, such as the classroom, self-access centers and distance learning pro-

grams, and the articles that we present in this issue testify to this wide-ranging applicability in second language education. The first three contributions examine different aspects that facilitate the learner's progress towards autonomy: *learner training, materials development* and *self-assessment.* Learner training is perceived by many scholars in the field as an essential pre-condition to help learners develop full autonomy. Concurring with this idea, Rosa Manchón presents arguments and suggestions for implementing learner training in communication strategies, a subset of language learning strategies which are regrettably not always considered in current applications of strategic training. Tony Lynch, on the other hand, shows how learner autonomy can also be enhanced through the development of learner support materials. He discusses a project which involved the design of learning materials for university advanced users of English, whose objective was to help them exploit and learn from the multiple opportunities for learning they have in the academic and social environment in which they are immersed. In his paper, David Gardner holds up to critical scrutiny the use of self-assessment as a way of enhancing learner's progress and concludes that, when carefully managed, the benefits can outweigh the pitfalls.

Distance language learning courses are increasingly gaining ground; yet not many studies have attempted to examine the nature and particular constraints that characterize this type of learning. Stella Hurd's contribution throws some light onto this area, and presents a study in which the perceptions, strategies and problems of distance language learners are analyzed.

The last three articles are centered around one of the most popular applications of self-directed learning systems nowadays: *self-access learning.* Aldred and Williams document the problems and subsequent changes that were undertaken on a self-access center over a number of years, and advocate the need for a focused approach in autonomous learning and self-access programs for both students and teachers.

Learner autonomy has often been mistakenly equated with a reduction in the teacher's role. The contributions by Serra and Mozzon-McPherson show how this role is, in fact, expanded to include new tasks that are to facilitate the learner's path to autonomy. Serra examines the various tasks and roles that are to be fulfilled for a self-access system to work efficiently. He argues that the links between the pedagogues (teachers and counselors), the self-access center staff (librarians and technicians) and the language institution are of central importance for the effective functioning of the self-access system, and introduces the figure of a 'self-access system co-ordinator', who is to ensure the interaction among the different parts involved. Mozzon-McPherson's paper focuses specifically on the roles and skills of language learning advisers and examines the discourse and the role of dialogue as a means to ensure the learner's self-understanding and effective self-directed learning. To this end, a model for language learning advising is compared with the person-centered counseling model as it is currently applied in psychology.

Starting with this issue, we introduce a miscellany section with articles on topics other than that of the monograph. For this particular issue, we have included two articles related to the area of second language acquisition: David Block's paper explores the reasons for the existing gap between language teachers and second language acquisition researchers and puts forward suggestions for bridging the gap: collaborative research, action research, exploratory practice and theory-practice mediation. Istvan Kecskes's article argues that pragmatic skills in a second language do not necessarily reflect conceptual fluency in the target language in an adequate way because they are determined by individual differences.

As has become customary in our journal, we include an interview on a theme related to the topic of the issue: this time, on *self-access language learning*. The interview, which took a round-table format, was held in an electronic discussion forum on Learner Autonomy, with four prominent scholars: Leslie Dickinson, Lindsay Miller, Radha Ravindran and Gill Sturtridge.

An annotated bibliography on *autonomy in language learning* follows, which contains key references for those teachers, students or researchers who wish to embark on autonomous learning or enlarge their knowledge and expertise in the field. The book review section comprises five reviews which examine books that have been published in the area of *autonomy in language learning* in the last five years, and two on general topics within first and second language acquisition. In the last section, Notes and News, forthcoming conferences and events of interest to our readers are announced.

It is my hope that with this issue, the needs of both non-specialists and specialists alike will be met. To the former, the numerous contributions to this issue should be illustrative enough of the current debate and practices that characterize the field; to the latter, we hope they will serve to further expand the discussion and to chart new directions and research questions for them to pursue.

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