



Book Review: Reforming the Foreign Language Classroom:

Empowering Learners to Take Ownership

By Katja Heim, Leni Dam, Annika Albrecht, and Carmen Becker (eds.). Candlin & Mynard ePublishing (2025). 218 pages. ISBN (ebook): 9798233675997.

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Abstract

This review explores *Reforming the Foreign Language Classroom: Empowering Learners to Take Ownership* (Heim et al., 2025), a book which examines how learner autonomy can be meaningfully fostered across diverse educational contexts. The book integrates theoretical perspectives with classroom-based research, highlighting innovative practices grounded in the principles of learner autonomy. It is organised into three parts - placing the learner at the centre, outlining the teacher's responsibilities, and presenting emerging classroom practices. Together, these sections illustrate how learner autonomy can be approached from complementary perspectives and provide concrete examples for teaching and teacher development.

Keywords

1. Learner autonomy
2. Plurilingualism
3. Inclusive Education
4. Teacher education
5. Innovative Practices

AI Declaration

No artificial intelligence tools were used in preparing this article, apart from limited language refinement.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the content of this review.



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Book Summary

Reforming the Foreign Language Classroom: Empowering Learners to Take Ownership (Heim et al., 2025) brings together a collection of chapters that explore how learner autonomy can be fostered across a range of educational contexts. The volume consistently frames learner autonomy as a holistic educational philosophy grounded in meaningful communication, learner agency, teacher development, and inclusive classroom practice. By integrating theory, classroom research, and practical examples, the book offers valuable insights for language teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. The volume opens by situating learner autonomy within the historical development of European language education policy, including the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). David Little's opening chapter then develops this discussion through identity, dialogue, plurilingualism, empowerment, and proficiency.

Little also identifies a continuing gap between the aspirations of the revised CEFR and classroom practice. Grammar-oriented curricula, textbook-driven instruction, and institutional traditions continue to constrain autonomy-supportive teaching. Nevertheless, he demonstrates that learner autonomy and plurilingual education can be developed within ordinary school settings. Several chapters further develop this learner-centred perspective by exploring the relationship between learner autonomy, motivation, and learner agency. For instance, Albrecht and Becker connect learner autonomy with Self-Determination Theory, Ushioda's learner-centred view of motivation, Autonomous Language Learning, and Personal Learning Environments. They suggest that motivation is strengthened when learners build on their interests and exercise meaningful choice over their learning. Their discussion illustrates how language learning can become more meaningful when learners build on their personal interests, extracurricular competencies, and opportunities for meaningful choice.

Another major theme concerns inclusion, plurilingualism, and learner diversity. Little's discussion of plurilingual education is complemented by Legenhausen's chapter on inclusive education, which argues that learner autonomy should be understood within broader educational commitments to equity, participation, and learner well-being. Drawing on compassion-based and inclusive education perspectives, Legenhausen demonstrates how autonomy-supportive classrooms promote participation and mutual respect. Heim extends this discussion by examining the structural and psychological conditions that either support or constrain learner autonomy. Focusing on socially disadvantaged learners, she demonstrates how school structures, teachers' beliefs, and learners' mindsets influence opportunities for participation. Heim mentions that reflective teacher education is essential for supporting learner autonomy and engagement.



Teacher learning is another important theme. Berger and Dam contend that teachers need opportunities to experience autonomy themselves through reflective professional learning, illustrating this through an INSET model that combines Montessori principles, participant feedback, and action research. Through discourse analysis, Schildhauer demonstrates how teachers' everyday interactional choices shape learner autonomy by creating or restricting opportunities for autonomy-supportive classroom communication. Other chapters extend this practical orientation through negotiated lesson structures and agile methodologies, illustrating how autonomy-supportive practices can be adapted rather than applied as idealised solutions. The volume concludes with selected interviews with Leni Dam, who emphasises that learner autonomy develops gradually through dialogue, trust, and shared responsibility in everyday classroom practice.

Strengths

One of the book's strengths lies in its integration of theory, research, and classroom practice. Rather than presenting learner autonomy as an abstract educational ideal, the contributors demonstrate how it can be translated into everyday language teaching through concrete classroom examples grounded in both empirical research and professional experience. This balance makes the volume equally valuable for researchers seeking conceptual clarity and practitioners looking for realistic classroom applications. Another strength of the volume is its holistic conceptualisation of learner autonomy. Although the individual chapters address diverse topics, they collectively present learner autonomy as an overarching educational philosophy. The volume highlights the interconnections among learner agency, inclusion, teacher learning, and reflective practice, presenting a coherent perspective on language education.

The volume is also valuable for addressing contemporary educational challenges without losing sight of classroom realities. Multilingualism, inclusion, teacher beliefs, and institutional constraints are presented as conditions within which autonomy-supportive pedagogy must be negotiated. This attention to constraints strengthens the volume by avoiding an overly idealised account of learner autonomy. The volume's emphasis on teacher learning is another strength. By drawing on approaches such as Montessori education, agile methodologies, and action research, it positions teachers as reflective practitioners who adapt pedagogical ideas to their own contexts rather than simply implementing fixed models. This makes the book valuable for both researchers and practitioners.

Limitations

The volume nevertheless has a few minor limitations. First, the concluding interview with Leni Dam presents only selected excerpts that support the organisation of the volume. Readers interested in a more comprehensive understanding of her thinking may wish to consult the complete interviews available elsewhere (e.g., Stringer, 2024). A second limitation concerns the geographical scope of the examples. Most chapters draw on European educational contexts. While the pedagogical principles are potentially transferable, examples from other regions would have shown more clearly how learner



autonomy is interpreted under different institutional and cultural conditions. More broadly, although the volume convincingly demonstrates how autonomy-supportive practices can be developed at classroom level, its own recognition of institutional constraints raises the question of how such practices can be sustained or extended beyond individual classrooms. A fuller consideration of this issue would have strengthened the volume's broader implications for educational reform.

Reflection

Reading this volume encouraged me to reconsider my own teaching and research in Japan. Little's discussion of plurilingualism and learner autonomy, together with Legenhausen's chapter on inclusive education, prompted me to reflect on multilingualism in Japanese classrooms. When a Vietnamese student recently participated in my English class for one day as part of an international exchange programme, I realised that although the Japanese translation function provided in many digital textbooks was useful for most learners, it offered little support for students who did not understand Japanese and could even increase their anxiety. This experience reinforced my belief that learner autonomy cannot be separated from inclusive educational practice. It also highlighted the need to design classrooms that recognise learners' diverse linguistic resources rather than assuming Japanese as a shared first language.

The chapter by Albrecht and Becker also resonated strongly with my own teaching practice. My Exploratory Action Research (EAR), which I have been conducting for two years, takes an interdisciplinary approach and connects classroom learning with extracurricular activities at school. Their emphasis on learners' interests, extracurricular competencies, and meaningful choice closely mirrored the principles guiding my EAR. Rather than adopting project-based learning (PBL) or task-based language teaching (TBLT) as predetermined methodologies, I have implemented these approaches through my EAR in response to students' reflections and ongoing dialogue, shaping projects around what matters to them. The chapter encouraged me to consider more explicitly how these aspects of my practice might support students' agency and motivation in their learning. The book reminded me that meaningful innovation begins not with a methodology itself but with careful attention to learners' interests, voices, and experiences.

Spindler and Janzen Ulbricht's account of developing classroom practice through negotiation with students also resonated with the second year of my Exploratory Action Research, in which I have been implementing a negotiated syllabus and lessons. Their chapter encouraged me to reflect further on how negotiation can create greater space for students to influence their learning. Dam's emphasis on trust resonated with my own experience as well. After presenting my two-year EAR on student voice and learner agency at an international conference this year, I commented, 'I do not know why my students have suddenly started to share their opinions, feelings, and ideas about my teaching with me.' One attendee immediately responded, 'It's trust!'. Reading Dam's interview reminded me of this exchange and prompted me to consider how trust may have gradually developed through sustained dialogue with my students.

Schildhauer's discussion of classroom discourse analysis also aligned closely with my current scoping review examining the representation and empowerment of student voice on Participatory Action Research, in which I use Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a complementary analytical approach (Imanishi & Yun, 2026). His analysis reminded me that



learner voice is shaped not only by opportunities for participation but also by teachers' everyday interactional choices. Even seemingly small discourse moves can either create or restrict opportunities for learner agency. This chapter encouraged me to reflect more critically on my own classroom discourse.

Finally, Berger and Dam's chapter on the INSET model integrating Montessori principles with autonomy-supportive pedagogy resonated with my experiences as both an English language teacher and a mother of two daughters. Montessori education is well known in early childhood settings in Japan, yet opportunities to continue this approach beyond kindergarten remain limited. After my daughters graduated from a Montessori kindergarten, I became interested in how Montessori principles might be incorporated into English language teaching. Thus, discovering through this chapter that Montessori education had influenced Leni Dam's work on learner autonomy was both surprising and reassuring. It helped me understand why I had been drawn to both Montessori education as a parent and autonomy-supportive language teaching as a teacher. More importantly, the authors' argument that teachers need to experience autonomy themselves before fostering it in their learners strongly resonated with my own understanding of teacher development. It also helped me recognise more clearly how learner autonomy and learner agency are closely intertwined with teacher autonomy and teacher agency. Berger and Dam's emphasis on action research strengthened my commitment to reflective practitioner inquiry as a means of improving my teaching and collaboratively shaping autonomy-supportive learning environments with my students.

Conclusion

Overall, this volume makes a valuable contribution to contemporary language education by presenting learner autonomy as a holistic educational philosophy grounded in learner agency, plurilingualism, inclusion, teacher learning, and reflective practice. Through its combination of theoretical perspectives and classroom-based examples, it offers both conceptual insight and practical guidance for language teachers, teacher educators, and practitioner-researchers. As Berger and Dam conclude, effective pedagogical approaches can be adapted across educational contexts. I expect to return to this book as I continue my teacher research.



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