# How can E-learning promote Learner Autonomy?

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The article reports on a study where e-learning tools in the form of online tests, self-assessment and individual learning plans have been included into the teaching of Arabic as a second language at university level with the aim of promoting learner autonomy and thus helping first year students to make the often difficult transition from secondary school to university.

This is a shortened version of my article entitled E-learning and the dilemma of learner autonomy: A case study of first year university students of Arabic to appear in Orientalia Suecana, April 2013.

### Background and teaching goals

One of the core principles of the BA-programmes in Arabic at the University of Southern Denmark is that knowledge and skills taught throughout the programmes should apply to practical life within a professional context. In order to ensure the link between foreign language studies and a professional career, students can study Arabic only if they combine their language study with another subject, at present either business economics, communication studies or cross cultural pedagogics.

This approach is a clear break with the traditional philological tradition, which has dominated university studies of Arabic in Europe for so long. The programmes have come about due to a wish for labour market relevance: Only a few Danish and international companies and institutions have the means to employ young people who are competent in Arabic only, even though globalisation as well as immigration have made Arabic the largest immigrant language in Europe along with Turkish. The labour market for university graduates in Arabic is further characterized by a lack of well-defined employment opportunities and a structural vulnerability resulting from the political and financial changes generally attached to immigrant languages in European societies.

The fact that language training in Arabic explicitly aims at fulfilling concrete needs in a labour market under constant change, places special demands on the skills to be taught. In addition to this, two trends have influenced our BA- programmes in Arabic since the late 1990s: The study programmes which were originally intended as an option for Danish secondary school graduates, are now primarily attended by young people of Arab or Middle Eastern decent, and simultaneously, the average high-school grade obtained by the students starting the study programmes of Arabic, has dropped significantly, so that today we have one of the lowest averages of entrance grades at the university. This trend can, at least partly, be explained by the ever increasing number of students allowed into Danish universities since the late 1990s. The low entrance level has led to a significant rise in student drop-outs, especially during the first year of studies, as well as a tendency for students to be what teachers perceive as passive, over-dependent on teaching and reluctant to challenge teacher authority with a critical mind. In other words, there is a tendency among students to see themselves more like "knowledge receivers" than students taking responsibility for their own learning, a skill so fundamental in university education.

In order to develop the students' academic skills and bring down the drop-out rate, we decided to focus on how we could facilitate the students' transition from secondary school to university, the aim being that the students would gradually learn how to take responsibility for their own learning and acquire the knowledge, independence, and analytical skills that characterize an academic education. It was assumed that these skills would not only help stu-

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dents make the difficult transition from secondary school to university, but would also prepare them for a labour market that calls for flexibility and adaptability to ever changing tasks.

**The choice of e-learning tools**

If learners are to become more self-directed and autonomous, it is important to create scaffolding activities which they can work on and benefit from, so as to eventually reach the desired goals. As a first step, it was decided to opt for e-learning tools as the pedagogical framework for the scaffolding activities, and for several reasons: First, e-learning makes it possible to work on learner autonomy outside the classroom, thus avoiding further time pressure on classroom teaching. Secondly, e-learning often has an added value in comparison with doing the same activities in a traditional "paper-based" way (access to digital resources, easy access to cooperative learning tools in authentic settings, etc.). And thirdly, e-learning simulates much better than traditional classroom activities the actual working conditions that students will meet, once they enter the labour market. By using e-learning tools as an integrated part of a university course in Arabic proficiency, but with the deliberate intention to develop learner autonomy through activities outside the classroom, we situated our intervention in the area commonly labelled "blended learning."

The next step was to pinpoint domains in the course of Arabic language proficiency which would be suitable for intervention. The following four domains were chosen:

(1) Computer skills in Arabic, allowing us to include e-learning tools and train Arabic language skills at the same time;
(2) Study skills which raise students' awareness about the extent to which learning takes place outside the classroom in a university setting, and how to deal with this adequately;
(3) Learning responsibility, that is the ability to set up learning goals independently and working to achieve them; and
(4) Evaluation in the forms of teacher feedback, peer feedback and self-assessment, that is to foster the learners' ability to assess realistically their results in Arabic language proficiency.

Particularly three areas within our existing Arabic study programmes seemed relevant regarding the change to e-learning, if the skills mentioned above were to be promoted. In the following, I shall explain briefly the background for and the implementation of e-learning in these three areas, and subsequently conclude on the actual achievements.

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*Computer skills: From tests to online tests*

Language proficiency tests have been a compulsory component of our curriculum since 1992 when our first Arabic programme was established. By integrating four compulsory tests per year, which the students must pass to be allowed to sit for the final exam, we push them to work continuously on their language acquisition, so as to prevent them from postponing their efforts until a few weeks before the final exams. Also, the testing provides feedback on their levels and efforts to the students of, in order for them to assess their progression, which is often a motivating factor.

The e-learning platform of our university, Blackboard, offers components to facilitate written as well as oral communication. By transferring our proficiency tests to online tests in Blackboard we could train students in writing Arabic on the computer as well as integrating Arabic resources from the Internet in the tests, thereby training information retrieval in Arabic, and thus set tasks which resemble the demands found today in many relevant job functions. To the reader who is not familiar with Arabic, those demands might seem very obvious, but it is only within the last 10 years or so that Arabic word processing has become standard software on the PC, and web pages in Arabic have become legible for ordinary PC users.

*Study skills: From tasks to portfolio*

Most foreign language writing takes place as an interaction between the teacher and the individual student. At the elementary level, these tasks often focus on specific linguistic phenomena in isolated sentences which make content less important than form. Such tasks support the narrow teacher–student interaction, since fellow students would simply not benefit very much from reading standardized sentences and short paragraphs written by their peers. If, on the other hand, writing tasks are to be defined in terms of "products", that is texts which can be of interest to fellow students or other readers, such as short advertisement slogans, postcards, introductions of family, web pages, etc., a new pedagogical dimension opens up. Then the reader becomes important, the content begins to play a crucial role, and the message will be of interest for others to read, comment on, and discuss. By creating a common learning space, which not only involves fellow students, but potentially also all sorts of other recipients outside the class, students normally become very motivated to engage in writing, because they can see a purpose which exceeds the traditional writing-for-the-teacher approach.

Most e-learning platforms are very suitable frames for creating a learning space to be used for "product oriented" writing lessons. The communication facilities in Blackboard allow the student to communicate with teachers and fellow students easily, exchange documents, include materials from the internet, and present products using mail functions, group folders with limited user access, notice boards, etc. Such a learning space does not only promote the

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students' motivation and reading skills, because they can read other students' texts; it often pushes the individual learner to reflect on his or her progress and learning style.

One way to favour this reflection is to establish work and presentation portfolios, which basically consist of two electronic folders in which the students put their writing tasks. The student then chooses a number of products, which are to be presented to other readers, such as fellow students, teachers, friends, etc., and place them in the presentation folder.

*Learning skills: From evaluation to self-assessment*
Apart from exams, the evaluation of students' language skills normally takes place when the teacher corrects and comments on oral and written exercises, to which students can, but do not have to, relate. Based on this feedback the teacher would then expect students to work on their own with the areas necessary in order to obtain better language skills. Normally, there are no procedures to ensure that students work on their results systematically and coherently, or that the test results are combined with a coherent learning programme; what the students do with their results, and how it influences their assessment of language skills, is considered a personal issue.

In order to provide scaffolding activities which would allow students to assess their efforts and language level results, and thus foster increased learner autonomy, new procedures for online tests were introduced. When online tests were marked, the students would receive an electronic copy of the paper and were asked to fill in an electronic questionnaire in which they had to evaluate the results, pinpoint possible problems and compare the results with their previous performances. They were also asked to indicate how they considered improving their results in future tests, and it was only when this self-evaluation was filled in, that the test was credited officially. On the basis of test results and the student's self-evaluation, the teacher then prepared an individual learning plan which was placed in the student's portfolio, to which only the teacher and the student had access. The student had then to approve or comment on the learning plan which subsequently formed the basis for the student's independent work towards the next test.

**Evaluation**
After having worked with online tests, portfolios, self-evaluation and individual learning plans for almost a year, we have started evaluating our success in promoting autonomous learner behaviour through the use of e-learning tools. The results reported below are based on teacher and learner feedback in the form of teacher's log, Blackboard's tracking system, students' self-assessment questionnaires and reports on portfolios as well as class room discussions between teacher and students.

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*Computer skills and online tests*

The use of e-learning technology and the setup of the students' own computers with Arabic script took up much time and attention. Minor problems, like remembering the passwords the students received from the university administration, logging in correctly to the university's computers, and choosing the correct paths of links to specific materials, made it clear at a very early stage that we had to produce clear-cut written instructions on how to use the technology, and also give the students a clearly defined area of responsibility for the set procedures, so that time was not to be wasted unnecessarily during teaching hours.

It was interesting to notice how the students coped with the demand for writing Arabic on the computer. Today, it is possible to write Arabic in *Word*, if the operating system has been installed with the correct language properties – all you need to do is to change the language on a small language icon at the bottom bar and alter the writing direction of the operating system by clicking on an icon in the top menu. The students were introduced to this using the university computers, and at the same time they were given instructions on how to install Arabic fonts on their own computers. Then, over a period of three weeks, they were asked to hand in short Arabic texts in a *Word* format – all of which was preparation for their first online test. Only a few of the students, however, complied with the request. Our assumption that the students would be able and willing to transfer their computer related skills into something as fundamental as the use of a word processor in Arabic, did not turn out to be true. It was only after the first online test where almost one third of the students failed, mainly because of time pressure combined with lack of typing skills in Arabic, that computer literacy in Arabic was taken seriously by all students.

Simple technology, clear and detailed instructions, and arguments clarifying the need for computer skills in Arabic, were necessary for making the transition of our proficiency tests to Blackboard work. Still, many students did not like it and they argued for a postponement of online tests at every given opportunity. But ultimately, the result was positive: 20 out of 24 students indicated in their evaluations at the end of the one year course that they were rather positive concerning the online tests after the first year of studying; they found the listening and reading tests easy to manage on the computer; they felt that they had become much better at writing Arabic on the computer and accepted the argument that computer skills are necessary in order to prepare for the job market.

*Portfolios*

The result of the work with portfolios was successful eventually, both concerning the students' motivation for working with product oriented writing exercises and writing texts for their fellow students to read. Again, however, there were problems before we reached that

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result. At first, it was optional for the students whether or not they wanted to put their papers into their portfolios, but as only a few handed in assignments written on the computer, we soon realized that working with portfolio had to be compulsory to have any effect. Accordingly, the tests in writing skills were created as product oriented tasks: The students were told that the tests in written proficiency, when corrected and marked, were to be placed in the shared portfolio, to which all students had access. Once the paper was there, the test would be credited.  When it became a compulsory task, and the students knew that their fellow students had access to their texts, some began competing with each other in writing good assignments.

The students' evaluations indicate clearly that the portfolio idea of writing product oriented papers which were to be read by everybody, made many of the students more interested in writing. A number of students also became more interested in reading. This can be seen from Blackboard's statistical function which traces each student's activities on the e-learning platform. The average reading frequency of the portfolio tasks rose by almost 50% compared to the frequency for other reading tasks.

*Self-assessment and individual learning plans*
The results of the self-assessment procedures and the individual learning plans were mixed. As the students became better at self-assessment, the gap between the test results and the self-assessment decreased, the students became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and accordingly, their self-assessment became more realistic. But at the same time, , the students' work with the individual learning plans was less successful: Of the 24 learning plans 8 students read and confirmed their learning plans on a regular level, 8 students read - or at least opened - the learning plans, but neither confirmed nor wished to discuss them with the teacher, while the last 8 students did not open them at all and consequently did not know what they contained.

The distribution had a gender related aspect: The class, which consisted of 24 students, had a gender distribution of 6 male and 18 female students. The 8 students who responded to the learning plan, were all female students, while 5 out of the 8 students who had not opened the plans, were male students. In other words: Only one of 6 male students in the class opened his learning plan, but did not respond. It was equally interesting that 6 out of the 8 students who chose to confirm the learning plans, were active and capable students, who dealt very well with other aspects of their learning process, while among the students who did not even open the learning plans, were the students who failed both the first and the second test.

## Conclusions

Did e-learning based on online tests, portfolio, self-assessment and individual learning plans promote more independent learner behaviour? In our context, it certainly did in a number of cases: Students obtained better computer skills in Arabic which was a prerequisite for working with e-learning tools, and most students developed a realistic assessment of their proficiency in Arabic and a raised awareness of their strong and weak points in the language acquisition process. The e-learning tools also favoured better study skills: By using the portfolio for product-oriented writing tasks and giving them the opportunity to read texts written by their peers, students came to work more independently outside the classroom, thereby improving their writing and reading skills.

However, when it came to taking responsibility for their learning process, a somehow worrying pattern emerged. There was a distinct difference between the way male and female students behaved, in the sense that the female students were clearly more active in using their learning plans than the male students. Equally worrying was the fact that the learning plans seemed to be beneficial mainly for the students who were already doing well in their studies, while the weaker students, who might have benefited from it, did not even to use the tool. Thus the use of individual learning plans seems to have widened the gap between strong and weak students. This conclusion is supported by other results (Nielsen et al., 2005) and makes one reflect on how, in the future, we will be able to support those students better who really need to improve their study skills and take more responsibility for their learning.

A final and equally interesting conclusion was that in order to encourage students' autonomous learning, we had to make the use of e-learning tools compulsory, otherwise most students would not have gone ahead with it. This is somehow contradictory in the sense that encouraging autonomous learner behaviour is not expected to be achieved by using compulsory means. A part of this dilemma might have to do with the fact that we are dealing with a language written in a non-Latin script which makes it more difficult and time-consuming for learners to work with e-learning tools, at least initially. The need to make e-learning tools compulsory challenged two of our initial assumptions: First, learners did not easily transfer their computer skills from Danish into Arabic, and consequently, we had to use much more time and efforts to train these skills than expected. And second, not all learners shared the assumed interest in developing learner autonomy, though it was clearly meant to improve their academic performance for their own benefit. We do not know, at present, the reasons behind their lack of interest – maybe they lacked the necessary motivation or maybe it lead to an increased workload which they were not prepared to cope with. Whatever the reasons the learner reactions was a reminder that motivation is a core factor if an increased degree of learner autonomy is to be achieved.

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