LEARNER AUTONOMY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT
IN THE CONTEXT OF *ITALKI*

by **Anna Turula**

Pedagogical University

ul. Podchorążych 2, Cracow, Poland

anna.turula @ gmail.com

Abstract

The article looks at language learner autonomy as a social construct in relation to the context and its user based on the example of *Italki*, a social networking site for tandem language learning. Considering the two foci – the context and the learner – the study is divided into two parts, both carried out from the perspective of online ethnography, each utilising different techniques and tools. Part 1, based on participatory observation and user experience of the author, was aimed at investigating the context of *Italki* as a language learning environment. Its affordances, noted in the course of the study, are analysed against the three aspects of social learner autonomy (Murray 2014): emotional, political, and spatial, in order to investigate the potential of *Italki* for interdependent learning. In Part 2 of the study, with its focus on the learner, the data were gathered by means of semi-structured open-ended interviews with *Italki* users (N=10). One of these interviews evolved into a case study, in which elements of social network analysis (SNA) were utilized to look at learner autonomy of an individual user.

The results of the study indicate that learner autonomy in the digital age can be both self- and other-regulated; characterized by learner independence as well as interdependence. All this is very much promoted by new tendencies in language learning and affordances offered by the new media. At the same time, though, the nature of the autonomy exercised will, to a large extent, be determined by individual learner agendas, motives and attitudes.

Key words: learner autonomy; tandem learning; online ethnography

1. Introduction

Palfreyman (2006) argues that one needs to *always* look at learner autonomy in the context of learning. Such contexts frame education, among others, by providing resources, both material and social. At the same time, though, central to these contexts is always the learner who uses these resources, with his/her unique agenda, motives, and attitudes.

With such a point of departure, this article proposes that the contemporary concept of language learner autonomy as a social construct (Dam, 1995; Little, 2004; Murray 2014) may be investigated from two perspectives. On the one hand, learner autonomy is about reaching out as the learner's "means to transcend the barriers between learning and living" (Little,

1995: 175). Living has certainly changed: the learner's means have become networked and highly influenced by the ways of Web 2.0. This has altered the nature of autonomous learning in general and, in particular, the character of self-accessed education. Social – or interactive (Hauck et al., 2012) – resources are more easily available nowadays, and, as a result, they may prevail over the material ones. This results in a shift from independence to interdependence in contemporary autonomous learning. Looking at learner autonomy as a social construct can involve examining the nature of such a shift vis-à-vis functionalities of individual learning environments.

At the same time, though, it is equally intriguing to see to what extent such a shift can also be seen in learner agendas, motives and attitudes. In such a case, the research will focus on:

(i) whether the autonomous learner of today utilizes interactive resources to satisfy his/her individual learning needs *as well as* to reach out to *the other*;

(ii) if he/she attempts to transcend the barriers between learning and living *but also* communicative / cultural boundaries;

(iii) if he/she wants to utilize what others offer *and* to be a resource him/herself in establishing different communities of learning.

The present article attempts to look at both the context and the learner in its investigation of learner autonomy as a social construct. In doing so it is divided into two parts, each presenting an aspect of an online ethnographic study carried out in March-May 2015. The article opens with a description of *Italki*, a social-networking language learning website, designed for formal and informal tandem learning of various world languages. This description is based on the outcomes of Part 1 of the study, carried out by means of participatory observation as well as based on user experience of the functionality of the site and its affordances. These research results are then analysed with reference to the three dimensions of autonomy as a social construct (Murray, 2014): emotional, political, and spatial. The aim of this part of the research was to investigate the context and to determine its potential for interdependent learning in its three different dimensions. As the research was planned as a thought experiment, this is done in relation to the concept of learner autonomy as a social construct and *not* vis-à-vis research to date. Afterwards, the article presents the results of Part 2 of the study: the qualitative research into the routines, motivation and partner selection criteria of 10 *Italki* users as autonomous learners of different languages. In this part, data were gathered by means of semi-structured open-ended interviews. As one of the interviewees agreed for a more in-depth study, a more thorough insight into the personal

context of this user is also presented. His interaction networks are examined, mapped onto collaboration graphs and subjected to social network analysis (SNA). During this part, the study focuses on learner agendas, motives, and attitudes. Similarly to Part 1, the subsequent data analysis pertains more to these factors, seen as connected to learner autonomy as a social construct, than to learning *per se*; as such, it is not examined in the context of previous research efforts. The article closes with conclusions drawn based on the study as well as teaching implications pertaining to language learner autonomy as a social construct.

2. The study

2.1. The aims of the research

The study of *Italki*, a social networking site for tandem learning of different world languages, was carried out for three months, in March-May 2015. It consisted of two parts, each of which had its own objectives:

(1) to investigate the functionality of the portal together with the language learning opportunities it offers;

(2) to examine the routines as well as agendas, motives and attitudes of *Italki* users, including the quantity and quality of personal connections created by such users.

Related to these objectives are, respectively, two research questions:

(1) Does *Italki* have the potential for developing / exercising social learner autonomy in its three dimensions: emotional, political, and spatial (Murray, 2014)?

(2) Can the shift from independence to interdependence be seen in the routines as well as agendas, motives and attitudes of *Italki* users?

While the research as a whole was carried out from the perspective of online ethnography, each of its parts had its own data collection techniques and tools.

Part 1 was based on online participatory observation and collection of digital artifacts (notes and their corrections, chat samples, etc.). Over a period of three months, 100+ hours were spent on different *Italki* activities (text and voice interaction, in-chat peer correction, note writing, note correction, reflecting on the note portfolio, browsing of site and its user profiles, etc.). During this exploratory period 50+ different artifacts were collected and stored in the form of researcher notes and screenshots (six of the latter are presented in Figures 1-6); additionally, a user interaction journal was kept (its contents were analysed and mapped into the collaboration graph presented in Figure 7).

Part 2 was based on semi-structured open-ended interviews with 10 *Italki* users. The questions of the interviews revolved around two basic issues of why the interviewees used

Italki and what their criteria for partnering were. One of the interviews revolved into a case study in which the user's social interaction patterns were examined and mapped onto collaboration graphs regarding both his learning networks as well as elements of his lifestyle. As such, this part of the study utilized some elements of social network analysis (SNA). This was an attempt to place the motivation of an individual user in his own unique context, an approach advocated by Ushioda (2011). Additionally, the detailed description of such an individual context served the purpose of a deeper insight into the emotional, political, and spatial aspects of autonomous learning (Murray, 2014).

As for its scope, the two-partite study was a small-scale investigation for a number of reasons. As a learning environment, *Italki* is rather elusive to a researcher. This, in particular, has consequences for research sampling procedures. First of all, the total number of *active* users is virtually impossible to determine without admin-level insight. As a result, the size of the population, which is a factor in selecting a statistically valid sample, cannot be known. Additionally, users tend to protect their privacy, which, in turn, makes in-depth interviews very difficult to carry out unless trust has been earned as a result of long-term language partnering based on regular interaction. A solution to these two problems was recruiting respondents from among the *Italki* contacts of the researcher (who chose to be a tandem language learner for three months). The main selection criterion was whether or not the respondents were autonomous learners, which posed another problem. The character of *Italki*-like tandem language learning – extracurricular, self-initiated, self-regulated – makes it justified to assume that learner autonomy in each user is a given. This is why the criterion was refined based on Little's (2002) definition of learner autonomy. As Little (2002) notes, "there is a consensus that the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and *a readiness to be proactive* in self-management and *in interaction with others*" (emphasis added). Consequently, the study sample was selected from among the researcher's network based on the subjects' proactive behaviour as regards interaction: the fact that they actively initiated and sustained contact on *Italki*.

2.2. Research context: introducing *Italki*

Italki – along with *lang8*, *Buusu*, *MyLanguageExchange*, *eToM* (electronic Tandem on Moodle), *Speaky* and many others – is a social networking site designed for tandem language learning. Such learning is based on one-to-one exchanges between speakers of different languages, who partner up to teach each other their mother tongue (or a language in which they are proficient) and to learn the target language from one another (Cziko, 2004). Apart

from such language-for-language barter exchanges, portals like *Italki* offer their users an opportunity to learn with professional teachers for a tuition fee.

A registered user of italki.com has his/her own dashboard, where different actions can be initiated (Figure 1; with description of individual aspects of the site functionality 1-10); and a profile (Figure 2), which can be personalized (photo; description – 4, Figure 2). Importantly, the profile serves as a learner portfolio in which the learner can keep all notes (including their corrections offered by other *Italki* users – 5, Figure 2) and which can be used for revision purposes and, in time, for insight into one's language development.

Upon a newcomer's first login, the *Italki* profile is randomly shown to other users, which may result in the first text-chat contacts (Figure 3). It is also possible to get in touch with fellow *Italkers*, channeling the search through one's target languages or by publishing notes in the languages learned – they are likely to attract the speakers or teachers who can make corrections or add comments (Figure 4). These are potential tandem partners with whom the user can subsequently initiate one-to-one contacts or schedule sessions. There will also be system-generated suggestions in the *Do you want more help* area (Figure 5), based on the notes published as well as the user's profile info.
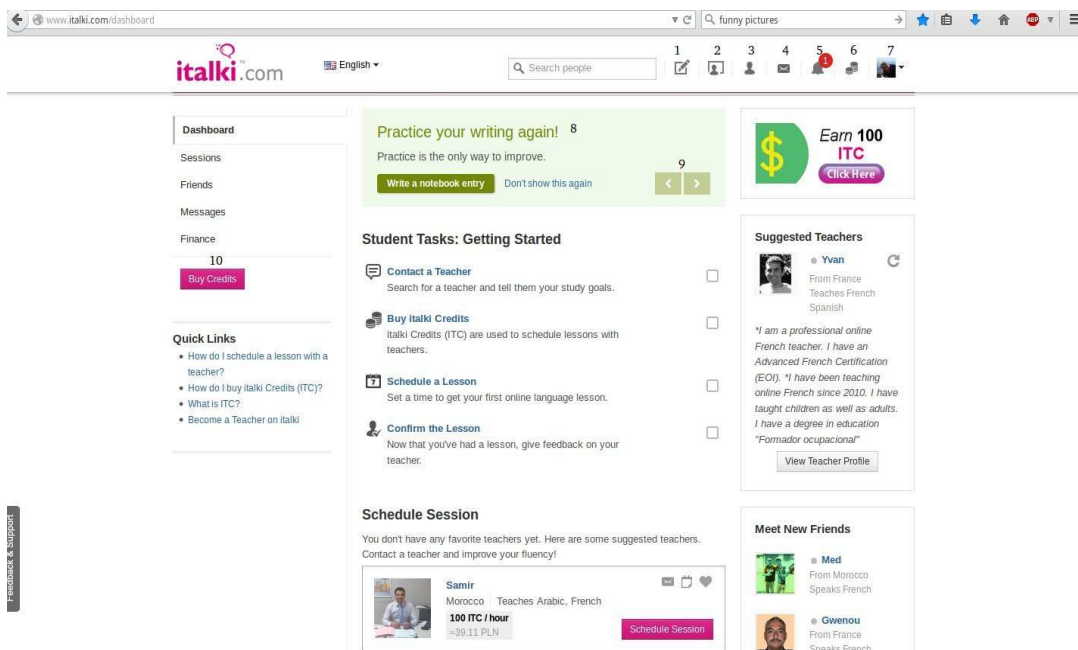

Figure 1. Italki dashboard

1. notes written to-date; 2. scheduled sessions with teachers; 3. friends; 4. messages; 5. notifications (of new followers or friends requests); 6. current *Italki* savings (ITC = *Italki* credits, bought with real money – used to pay for lessons with teachers); 7. profile; 8. quick access to various functions (slideshow); 9. important information (incl. introduction to *Italki*); 10.where you buy ITC

Figure 2. User profile

1. points scored (can be exchanged for ICTs); 2. contacts; 3. past *Italki* activity of the user; 4. personal info; 5. notes written to date with history of corrections; 6. past sessions; 7. a note (the most recent one); 8. mother tongue; 9. languages learned (with level marked).

Figure 3. First contacts on Italki

Figure 4. Other users' reactions to a note published

Figure 5. System activity upon a note published

After the first contact, which can be carried out in the *lingua franca* (Figure 3) or in both languages simultaneously (Figure 6), the *Italki* users who are ready to partner up may agree to have a voice chat via one of the popular CMC tools (Skype), as italki.com itself does not include voicechat functions.

Show More

У вас ест никакая идея как мы можем учиться вместе?

Maybe I will write to you in English and you will write to me in Russian, for some time? And then we can meet for a skype chat?

Что вы думаете?

Apr 10, 2015 19:24

мой скайп marinamaslova18

Apr 10, 2015 19:27

SnowAnnieColour is mine.
Do we also write? Or do you want to talk only?

Apr 10, 2015 19:30

Я добавила :) Мы можем и переписываться, и разговаривать :)

Apr 10, 2015 20:14

Awesome, thank you :-)

Apr 10, 2015 20:49

Figure 6. The bilingual text chat on *Italki*

As the number of contacts on *Italki* grows with use, after a time one is likely to become a node in a network (Figure 7), in which one is a node: (i) in relation to other nodes, creating and maintaining ties which may be stronger or weaker; (ii) engaging in voice, text or voice-or-text exchanges; or (iii) free not to sustain the unwanted edges (=relations with nodes).

Italki is an informal service in the sense that it is not part of any institutionalized schooling system. Enrolment and participation are a matter of choice for any user and so is the agenda, which may range from mere exploration through socializing in a foreign language to informal (peer-to-peer) or formal (tutored) language education.
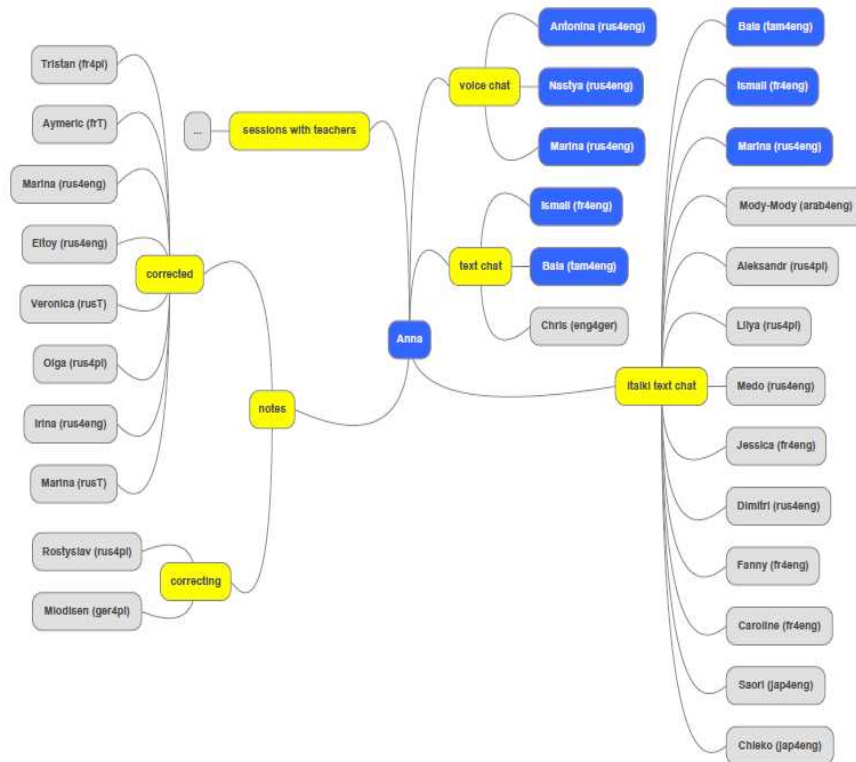
Figure 7. Italki user as a node in the web of contacts

(color blue indicates the regular ones; lang**a**4lang**b** indicates a proficient speaker of language a learning language b; T=teacher)

2.3. *Italki* as a scheme for learner interdependence – discussion 1

Considering all its characteristics described in the previous section – the non-institutional character of education; self-direction; opportunities for self-reflection (portfolio); choice as the basis for all user actions – *Italki* can be seen as what Little (2002) calls a self-access language learning scheme. As such, the portal is a context in which autonomy can be developed and exercised based on the resources the self-access scheme offers. These resources are by all means social rather than material, which makes *Italki* different from the self-access centers of the past. These centers were designed for language learning which was individual-cognitive rather than social-interactive, based on one's capacity for taking on the responsibility for (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991) or assuming the control of one's own learning (Benson, 2011). *Italki*, in turn, with its architecture and dynamics of a social network, offers its users a chance to develop and exercise learner autonomy in interaction; autonomy seen as a function of interdependence as well as independence in more recent literature on the subject (Little, 2004; Palfreyman, 2006; Murray et al., 2014; Murray, 2014). This section looks at *Italki* vis-à-vis the three aspects of language learner autonomy as a social construct: the emotional, the spatial and the political.

According to Huang and Benson (2013), the capacity to control one's own learning is based on three mainstays: the ability to take on the responsibility and to manage one's education; the desire to do so; and the freedom to take action. The *I can – I want to – I'm free to* triad is translated by Murray (2014) into three different aspects of learner autonomy as a social construct. In the first place, these aspects include the emotional (*I want to*) and the political (*I'm free to*) facets of being responsible / in control. However, as Murray (2014) notes, all the three components of autonomy proposed by Huang and Benson (2013) – the ability, the desire and the freedom – should always be considered in the context in which abilities are developed, desires are formed, and freedom is granted. Such a context is the third, the spatial, aspect of learner autonomy.

In order to evaluate *Italki* as a self-access scheme, it is important to answer the question of how well the portal accommodates the three aspects of learner autonomy as a social construct: the emotional, the political, and the spatial. This will be done by analysing the affordances of the site described in Section 1 in the light of relevant literature to-date.

2.3.1. The emotional aspect of learning a language on *Italki*

There are numerous links between the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learner autonomy (the *I can* facet) and motivation (*I want*). What is important is that the cause-effect relation of *I can therefore I want to* may be as strong as the one of *I want to therefore I can* (Turula 2006). On the one hand, self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2002) is a powerful internal drive which encourages learners to make effort in spite of their limitations. On the other hand, self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997) are an important factor in deciding to undertake and persevere with education. The social learning possible on *Italki* can be a powerful motivator as well as create and reinforce self-efficacy beliefs in several ways. These ways can be explained based on the three principles formulated by Little (2004) as a result of his observation of Dam's (1995) successful and highly motivating way of developing learner autonomy through interdependence. These principles include learner empowerment, learner reflection and the appreciation of the target language use.

Learner empowerment, as Little (2004) points out, is closely related to the feeling of being in charge / in control. As Murray (2014) argues, in autonomy-promoting contexts, this feeling has an equivalent: a sense of freedom. This is the case of *Italki*, where the user entertains freedom in many different spheres: to join the network; to initiate language contact; to choose his/her language partners and / or tutors; to respond to invites from other users; to

select the functions s/he wants to use; to decide how much self s/he is ready to disclose / invest. This gives a sense of power which adds to motivation (*I can therefore I want to*).

Self-efficacy can also be formed / reinforced through self-reflection. As Little (2004) observes, it is impossible to accept responsibility for learning without thinking about it. In addition to exercising control / freedom, setting goals and making choices, autonomous learners need to reflect upon the outcomes, evaluate their progress, identify their strengths and weaknesses. *Italki* affordances – with special regard to the repository of notes which serves as a learner portfolio – enable such reflection. The repository of notes can be a source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction which emerge during the self-reflection phase and take the form of emotional self-reaction (Zimmerman, 2013). Considering the fact that the *Italki* notes are public and interactive (other users can comment and correct), such emotions are social in nature (Damasio, 2003).

Last but not least, based on his already-mentioned observations of Dam's class, Little (1999, 2004) emphasizes the importance of putting together school knowledge and action knowledge. The latter is activated in authentic language use characteristic for autonomous learning contexts (but is rarely found in more traditional settings – cf. Legenhausen, 1999). *Italki* is an interactional context which gives numerous opportunities for the appreciation of the target language authentic use. It is likely to occur during less formal peer-to-peer exchanges as a result of interaction in which referential (=real, meaning seeking) rather than display (seeking to practice a language function) questions are likely to be asked. In response to such questions, users are socially coerced to "speak as themselves" (Legenhausen, 1999), as people rather than as language learners, ready to "engage their own motivations, identities and personal interests in their conversations" (Ushioda, 2011: 15). What is important, in the very context of *Italki* – largely informal, out-of-class, freedom-based – the identities engaged will be the transportable ones (who the person really is) rather than situated (who the person is in the classroom) or discourse (what the person is supposed to say) (Richards 2006). All this is a powerful social motivator underlying autonomous language learning.

Finally, there is a word to be said for one more type of socially grounded emotional investment of the autonomous learning on *Italki*: motivation as an experience of belonging rather than a motivational trait, "the desire to belong to multiple communities of practice" (Sade, 2011: 53), which *Italki* has a potential to satisfy. Apart from being a place to learn languages in tandem setting, the portal is also part of sharing economy. The question will be discussed in more detail in the subsection devoted to the political aspects of *Italki* as a self-access scheme. At this point, however, it needs to be pointed out that the social architecture

(community) and the interaction dynamics (language for language) of the portal may attract all these who like to think of themselves as independent from the traditional market mechanisms and forces; those who incline towards goods-for-goods or service-for-service exchanges based on experience they may have in other forms of community-based sharing (car pooling, couch surfing, etc.). This brings us to integrative motivation in its new understanding: seeking group membership based on motives that are very personal and linked to one's internal identification with one's self concept (here: a participant in sharing economy) rather than a certain external force (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). Learner autonomy developed with such motivation will be both "situated in terms of the institutional and cultural context and dependent on learner goals and personality traits. The interaction of these internal and situational factors will determine the degree of autonomy demonstrated by the learner." (Leary, 2014: 17).

2.3.2. The political aspect of learning a language on *Italki*

Promoting learner autonomy always happens in a cultural context. No matter whether we understand culture as national, institutional or a shared way of life (Palfreyman, 2003), efforts aimed at proposing, developing, and sustaining learner independence and self-regulation will need to take into account the specificity of this context.

> In the case of the national and institutional contexts, as Murray (2014: 334) points out,
>
> [w]e need learning spaces that facilitate activities that promote the development of learner autonomy and self-regulation. These learning spaces will need to be equipped with digital and material resources, while at the same time enabling students to move around and work with each other. The creation of these spaces is going to take political will and imagination.

Such political will and imagination have to be particularly strong in educational cultures that favor hierarchical organization of and in schooling, value control and coordination over trust and collaboration, and prefer teacher-fronted to learner-centered classrooms. This refers to both national schooling systems as well as micro-contexts of individual institutions, with their ideas of what should happen in the classroom as regards the roles teachers and learners, the routines of communicating, asking and answering questions and other aspects of education, which Jin and Cortazzi (1998: 37) call "key elements in cultures of learning".

Learning a language in a tandem on sites like *Italki* is a potential challenge to such systems. It is extracurricular and teacher-independent; it crosses the boundaries of traditional education in many different ways, bringing together the real and the virtual realms, the school and the active knowledge (Little, 2004), the worlds inside and outside the classroom

(Legenhausen, 1999). By making the language class so thin-walled (Richardson and Mancabelli, 2011), it requires a change in education which goes beyond minor improvements into the realm of a paradigm shift. Opening a language class to social networking does not require an educational re*form*, it requires trans*form*ation (Richardson and Mancabelli, 2011). And transformative changes can be of great, sometimes unwelcome proportions, resulting in:

(i)   hierarchy flattening – most exchanges on *Italki*, including student-teacher interactions, are rather informal in terms of language;

(ii)   authority distribution – *the* teacher is replaced by *numerous* teachers, and the learner moves from predetermined classroom setting to the freedom of choice *Italki* grants;

(iii) control loosening – on *Italki* the user is self- and peer- rather than teacher-regulated.

In educational cultures – national or institutional – where hierarchy flattening and authority distribution are seen as undermining the teacher's position, and control loosening is perceived as a threat to both the system and the learner, making the language classroom walls thin by encouraging *Italki*-like tandem language learning may indeed require political will to acknowledge the agency of the learner. It will also take the imagination to think out of the current educational *status quo* with its practices, assigned roles and institutions. This does not imply that *Italki* users will always have political agendas when undertaking tandem learning on the site. However, their decisions to do so have political meaning (even if unintended) and consequences (even if yet to be seen).

Italki-like tandem learning will also be political when understood as a way of living. With their community-based, language-for-language, peer-to-peer mode of operation, such portals are strongly embedded in sharing economy. Rooted in the changing attitudes to consumption and facilitated by the Internet, sharing economy is also referred to as Collaborative Consumption (CC) and defined as (Hamari et al., 2015) "the peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services." There is a general tendency to relate these practices to Web 2.0 and its defining characteristics, such as user-generated content, sharing practices (social media), collaborative online projects (e.g., *Wikipedia*), all of which are associated with the following motivations (Oh & Syn 2015: 2045): enjoyment, self-efficacy, learning, personal gain, altruism, empathy, social engagement, community, interest, reciprocity, and reputation. Importantly for the present line of argument, most of these motivations are social in nature. Like the use of social media as well as practices such as car pooling, couch surfing

and other forms of collaborative consumption, *Italki* tandem learning is not only an aspect of contemporary lifestyle but also a challenge to traditional consumption and redistribution patterns, which, in the case of language learning, are organized private and public schooling. As a result, exercising this kind of autonomy in education is a political action (once again – even if unintended or yet seemingly inconsequential).

2.3.3. The spatial aspect of learning a language on *Italki*

When thinking about *Italki* from the user perspective, it is only natural to describe it as "a place where one can learn languages in tandems". Considering the fact that this place is a virtual *space*, based on architecture which is primarily human (its coding being of lesser importance here), it seems right to see this space – based on the general consensus among theorists on human geography (cf. Murray, 2014: 330) – as a social construction. As such, *Italki* has a number of autonomy-related spatial characteristics: its networked structure, its flexible boundaries and its multidimensionality.

Engaging in the different forms of tandem language learning on *Italki*, the user gradually builds his own web of relations – with language partners, teachers, correctors – which, as every personal learning network, is highly individual, in terms of numbers (how many contacts), intensity (how often) and selectivity (who with) of interaction, as well as formal variety (which activities). The networked structure has consequences for the two other spatial factors: boundaries and dimensions.

The issue of *Italki* boundaries is associated with the idea of autonomy as control (Benson, 2011). Murray (2014: 331) questions this conceptualization in relation to the spatial dimension, proposing "in this social learning space autonomy primarily manifests itself as the possibility for learners to exercise their agency within the environment rather than their control over the environment". This is very much the case of *Italki* tandem language learning. With the open, networked structure of interactions, full control seems impossible and gives way to the freedom of choice. In this area, the *Italki* user can exercise his/her agency as to the shape of his/her network, the range of activities, as well as the personal and financial investments s/he is willing to make. In practice, this will translate into the user making their choice of: potential language partners based on the freedom to favor the preferred interlocutors and ignore those with whom learning is less effective or unenjoyable (or even ban unwelcome contacts); teachers, following from learner styles, preferences or agendas; activities, which can cover a number of skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking; words, grammar and spelling) or be limited to just one of them; and of the extent to which s/he is

willing to make personal investments: disclose the name, face, communicator IDs, etc. In this sense, by empowering its user with the freedom of choice, *Italki* is a space with thin boundaries which allows setting personal boundaries: social, formal, organizational, temporary, etc.

This freedom of choice is closely related to the multidimensionality of *Italki* as a space. The user's involvement may be deep or superficial, long-ranging or temporary, comprehensive or channeled. S/he can broaden his/her network or deepen the existing relations; buy lessons with different teachers for variety or in search of the one(s) that suit(s) him/her. The learner may practice all language skills in a balanced way or decide one of them (speaking? writing?) is his/her priority and concentrate on it. And s/he may pursue learning goals, learning and social goals, or purely social goals, treating *Italki* as a language class or a social network, and the target language – as a system (subsystem?) to master or as a means of communication. *Italki* as a space understood as a social construction grants its user the autonomy in all these areas of decision making and learning management.

Overall, developing and reinforcing learner autonomy on *Italki* is definitely social by way of the emotional, political and spatial character of actions taken on the website. As a result, as it has been shown in this section, autonomous tandem language learning is likely to generate emotions most of which will be of social origin, because, as Ushioda (2011) puts it, they will be expressed in the social setting destined for autonomous learning as well as the social setting will give raise to them. Learner autonomy on sites like *Italki* is also political: its users, even if unaware of the fact, challenge the existing educational practices, roles and institutions as well as consumption patterns. By enabling this, the site is likely to promote – as well as to cater for – new attitudes, beliefs and lifestyles. Finally, autonomous education in the form of tandem learning is social through its spatial properties: a learning place understood as a social construction, thin-walled and based on freedom, and multidimensional in its human geography. In this sense, the answer to Research Question 1 is affirmative.

What is important to note here is that the above considerations – the synthesis of learner autonomy as a social construct and *Italki* affordances – are rather theoretical and speculative. What is interesting is how *real* users of *Italki* employ this potential. The answers to this question are presented and discussed in Section 2.2, presenting Part 2 of the study.

2.4. The learner: introducing *Italki* users

The insights into user routines, agendas, motives, and attitudes were gained in two different ways. First, a group of 10 *Italki* users were interviewed as regards their motives for learning

on *Italki* and their partner selection criteria as well as rationale. This sample included 3 men and 7 women, aged between 15 and 51, coming from Russia (2), Poland (2), Japan (2), Ukraine (1), Morocco (1), Great Britain (1) and France (1).

After a series of semi-structured interviews, the ten *Italki* users were asked to take part in a follow-up study aimed at seeing their motives in a unique, personalized context. The only person who agreed was U7. He was a 24 male from Poland, where he had lived all his life with the exception of the last 12 months, spent in the United Kingdom (7 months, student) and the United States (5 months, participant of work-and-travel programme). He is a native speaker of Polish, a proficient user of English (ESOL Cambridge certificate, 2010, level C2) and a learner of Japanese. He holds an M.Sc. in digital signal processing – a joint diploma from two universities, Polish and British. His interests include artificial intelligence, natural and artificial languages, literature, cinema and travelling.

2.4.1. The interviews

All ten interviews were carried out in May 2015. They lasted between 15 and 30 minutes each. The CMC channel used was a synchronous text chat. As mentioned above, the interview was semi-structured, in the sense that all its questions revolved around the two main issues: the user's motivation for using *Italki* and his / her partnering criteria. The answers of the 10 respondents are summarized in Table 1.

As it is shown in Table 1, the motives for tandem learning on *Italki* can be ascribed to two basic orientations: instrumental and integrative. The former is manifested by some respondents in their linking *Italki* practice with present or future jobs or study prospects (U1, U2, U5); the latter – understood as an experience of belonging, the desire "to belong to multiple communities of practice" (Sade 2014: 53) or simply to affiliate with likeminded individuals – seems to be behind the interest in other cultures and people a number of the respondents express (U6, U7, U8, U9). These two user drives are confirmed by the partnering criteria reported: they range from goal-oriented (the choice of proficient / native speakers only – U1, U4) to people-oriented (nice; the need to 'click' – U7, U8, U9). Yet, the individual motivations of the ten respondents need to be placed on an instrumental-integrative continuum rather than considered in terms of an instrumental-integrative dichotomy.

Table 1. 10 Italki users' motivation for language learning and partnering criteria

Who [sex] (proficient or native user of ... / learning ...)	Why	Who with
U1 [f] (rus/eng)	I want to learn English to be a teacher of this language.	I'm ready to learn with any proficient user English. But I check their profile first.
U2 [f] (rus/eng)	I want to pass my entrance exams to university. I also want to communicate with other users of English.	I learn with everybody who speaks good English as long as they are female and know a little about language teaching.
U3 [m] (fr/eng)	I want to talk in English. I want to check if I can be understood by a proficient user of the language.	I partner with anybody who knows English and can teach it.
U4 [f] (fr/eng)	I want to practice speaking English.	I only interact with native speakers of English.
U5 [m] (eng/ger)	I need German in my job.	I'll learn with anybody.
U6 [f] (eng/rus)	I'm interested in other cultures. English is just a means of communication, a lingua franca.	I partner with anybody as long as they want to learn. I'm not interested in flirting
U7 [m] (eng/jap)	I want to learn Japanese – the laguage and its culture.	I'll learn with anybody as long as we "click" (and it's not about flirting). It is also important that we understand each other (I exclude users who speak English poorly – with my only basic Japanese we cannot communicate.
U8 [f] (jap/eng)	I want to speak better English, to learn about foreign cultures and to meet new people.	I partner with anybody who is a nice person.
U9 [f] (jap/eng)	I want to polish my English. And to meet new people.	I choose my partners based on their profile (they have to declare the will to learn Japanese) and on the first-contact impression: if they use my name when they write to me.
U10 (f) (rus/ang)	Learning English is a hobby (I'm a stay-at-home mum and I want to kill time). Plus I want to talk in a foreign language and see somebody understands me.	I'm ready to learn with anybody.

This is because the motives of most of them – with the possible exception of three persons reporting exclusively instrumental orientation (U1, U4 and U5) – are a combination of different shades and degrees of both types of motivation. Another important observation is that the motives are connected with the self: the *perceived* one as well as the *ideal* and the *ought-to* selves (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). The users state where they want to see themselves as a result of tandem learning (the ought-to or the ideal self; U1, U2 and U5); and they are people with identities: what and how they learn, as Little (2004) puts it, is part of who they are

(matter-of-fact: U2, U5; nice, people-oriented: U8, U9). Finally, as shown especially by the partnering criteria, *Italki* as a learning context is characterized by the user's freedom of choice which, based on very individual criteria (learning as a goal – U1, U3, U4; social preferences – U2, U6, U7, U8, U9, personal safety – U2), is exercised by the users.

2.4.2. The case study

The data obtained in the in-depth interview with U7 have been mapped into three different collaboration graphs in which U7 is the central node: his *Italki* web of contacts (Figure 8) as well as two other networks accommodating *Itaki*: his personal learning network (Figure 9) and his collaborative consumption experience (Figure 10).
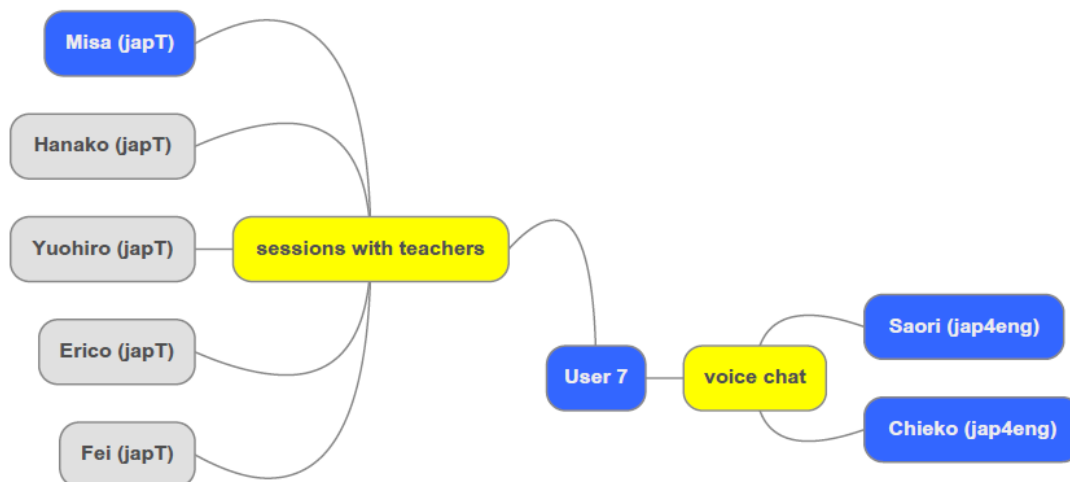

Figure 8. User 7 as a node in the Italki network

As it can be seen in Figure 8, the *Italki* network of User 7 is not too vast – it is limited in three different ways. First of all, even though the user has tried lessons with different teachers, his sessions are now regularly held only with Misa (whom he chose for her teaching style and her interest in culture). He is similarly selective in his choice of *Italki* tandem learning: he has two regular partners, and he did not choose to report his one-time experiences dismissing them as inconsequential. Finally, his *Italki* activities are restricted to speaking. The reason for this can be noted in Figure 9: User 7 has his own ways of practising vocabulary, grammar and writing and does not have to rely on *Italki* peer correction of notes.
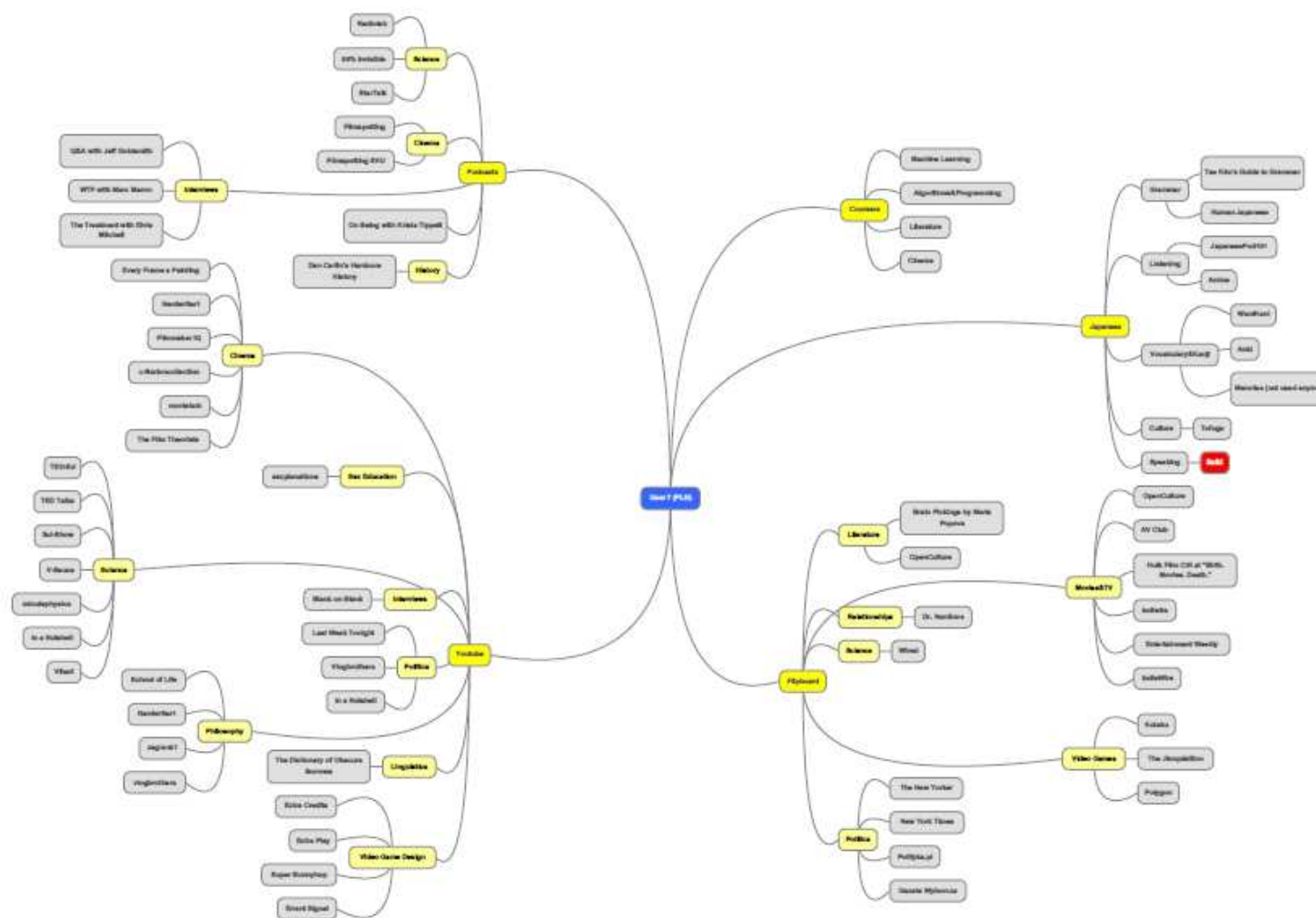
Figure 9. User 7's online personal learning network ((The image is illegible and enclosed only to show the scale; the complete PLN can be seen here)
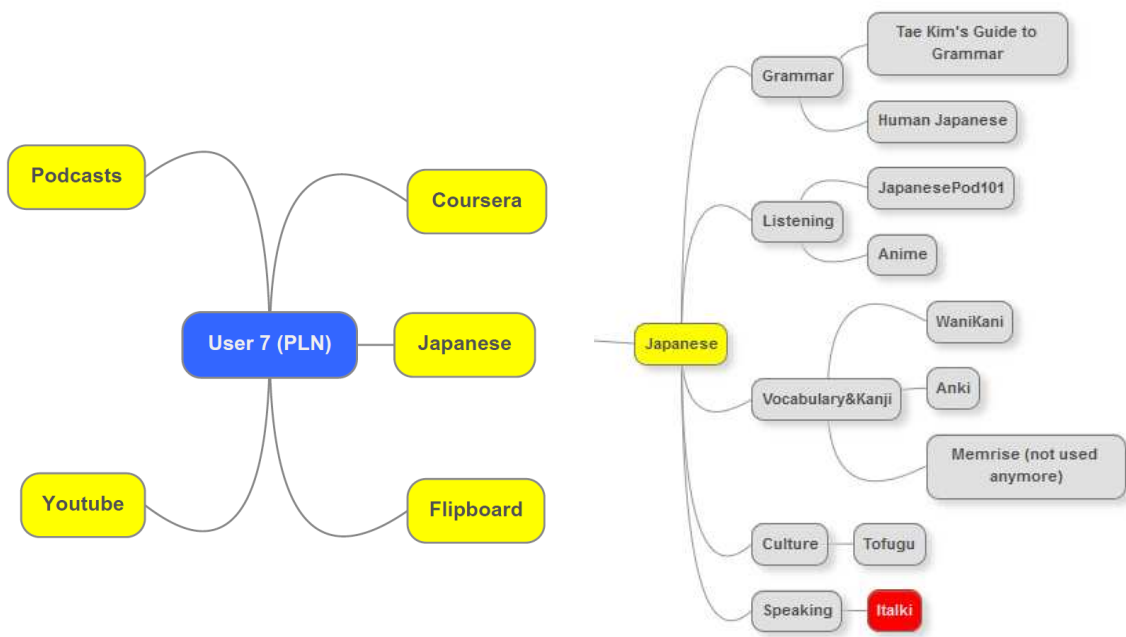
Figure 9a. The superordinate nodes   Figure 9b. The Japanese node
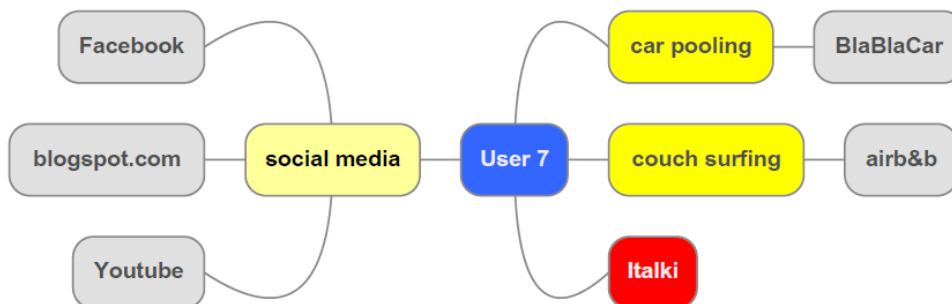
Figure 10. User 7's collaborative consumption (CC) experience

What can also be seen in Figures 8-10, is that

- the scale of the personal learning network of User 7, which is vast and diverse, his areas of interests range across sciences and humanities, from linguistics through philosophy and politics to computer science; and are realized by means of an array of new media;

- User 7 has experience in various forms of sharing, including social networking as well as three different areas of the CC economy;

- *Italki* is the common node of the PLN and CC networks, this is where the learning routines and collaborative consumption meet (Figures 9 and 10);

- for User 7 the *Italki* experience has the-context-within-context quality – it is embedded into two much vaster networks of who the person is, in terms of cognitive and affective needs, interests and lifestyle.

2.5. Between independence and interdependence – discussion 2

Similar to *Discussion 1*, the analysis of the data is carried out in relation to the three aspects of social learning autonomy: the emotional, the political, and the spatial. However, the focus – especially as regards the emotional aspect – is on the cognitive-individual vs. social-interactive, in an attempt to answer Research Question 2 – *Can the shift from independence to interdependence be seen in the routines as well as agendas, motives and attitudes of Italki users?*

When it comes to the emotional aspect of learner autonomy, the responses given by the ten users show that *Italki* learners have a sense of empowerment, undertake self-efficient actions based on reflexivity, and enjoy the authentic use of language. The results (Table 1; in-depth interview with User 7) demonstrate that the ten users have well-defined expectations of the portal as regards language learning as well as – in most cases – their partnering criteria. They also exercise the freedom to only use the functions of the portal that help them meet the expectations; as well as select the teachers and peers with whom to learn in relation to their agenda. Additionally, the integrative motives reported by most show that they enjoy the experience of using the target language. They treat it as:

(i)   a way to talk *as themselves* (Legenhausen, 1999; Ushioda, 2011) and hear others do the same (*to learn about foreign cultures and to meet new people* – U8);

(ii)   a challenge of the sort commonly not offered in the traditional language (*to check if I can be understood by a proficient user of the language* – U3);

(iii)   authentic in the sense that it meets current goals, short- and long-term (*I'm a stay-at-home mum and I want to kill time*; *I want to learn English to be a teacher of this language* –U10).

An important point in the discussion of the results pertaining to the emotional aspect of autonomy as a social construct is the question of the integrative and instrumental orientations noted in the study. On the one hand, the fact that some users (U1, U4 and U5) demonstrate the exclusively instrumental drive may indicate that, in their case, other people (and portals, like *Italki*, where they can be found) are self-access centers in their pre-Web 2.0 understanding. For such people *Italki* may not go far beyond a place where individual agendas can be implemented and not a community of practice where one can learn not only *from* other

people but also *about* them and *with* them. Oxford (2003) differentiates between these two type of socio-cultural learning describing them as: (i) individual learning in a group, the socio-cultural aspect of learning limited to its being situated in space and time, in context; and (ii) group learning, carried out in communities of practice. If we adopt this division as the basis for classifying user motives underlying autonomous learning on *Italki*, it needs to be said that a shift in the learning model / new contexts of autonomous learning (cf. *Discussion 1*) is not necessarily followed by a similar change in every learner. In the research sample described there are users whose autonomy can be defined in the individual / (meta) cognitive rather than socio-interactive terms. Their social learning is socially motivated only when it comes to learning *from* (the self-access model) and not necessarily *about* or, more importantly, *with* others.

At the same time, such an interpretation can be subject to two major reservations. The first follows from the new understanding of the integrative language learner motivation in the globalized world (Dörnyei 2005 and 2009; Ushioda, 2011; Ushioda and Dörnyei, 2012). Since such motivation is seen as a very personal construct, a link to one's internal identification with one's self concept rather than with some kind of external force (Ushioda 2006 and 2011), it seems appropriate to expand integrativeness to refer to "a generalized international outlook or attitudes to the international community at large." (Ushioda, 2006: 150). This goes hand in hand with Yashima's (2002: 57) concept of "international posture," defined as "interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and [...] openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures". As such, the concept includes both the intercultural friendship and vocational interests, thus combining aspects of the integrative and instrumental orientations. An attitude of this kind is manifested by all of the 10 respondents, and in each of the cases it can be seen as an experience of belonging (Sade, 2011): partaking, through language, in various cultures; being a member of a professional community; belonging as opposed the loneliness of a stay-at-home mother; etc. This can also be seen in the personal learning and experience networks of User 7 – learning on *Italki* makes him a part of a number of communities of practice: speakers of other languages; self-directed learners; collaborative consumers. In the light of this, it seems a bit farfetched to classify some learners as independent-rather-than-interdependent, based on their instrumental – as opposed to integrative – motives alone.

The second reservation to be made vis-à-vis the distinction between the cognitive-individual and the social-interactive autonomy on *Italki* is the one commonly expressed in the

context of motivation research. As Ushioda (2009) argues, in general the conclusions in research into motivation are drawn based on statistical averages rather on insights into unique characteristics of particular individuals. As a result, ironically, despite the focus on how people differ (from each other or from a standard), this research "concerns itself ... with the shared characteristics of particular types of individuals" (Ushioda, 2009: 12). The alternative she proposes is a "person-in-context relational view" of motivation: focus on real persons rather than learner abstractions; focus on "the agency of a person as a thinking and feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, with goals, motives and intentions" (12-13). The case study presented in this study shows that a similar approach may be desirable in autonomy studies. This transpires from the complexity and contextuality of User 7's autonomous behaviors. More importantly, though, it also indicates that before classifying users U1, U4 and U5 as independent-rather-than-interdependent in terms of their agendas, motives and attitudes, we should consider them in a broader and – inevitably – dynamic context of their interactions, on *Italki* and beyond. This being outside the scope of the present study, no definite conclusions as regards their beliefs and attitudes are justifiable.

When it comes to the other aspects of learner autonomy as a social construct – the political and the spatial – the results of Part 2 of the study seem to endorse the assumptions presented in Sections 2.2 and 2.3.

As regards the political aspect of autonomy, it is manifested, first of all, in the composition of the research sample. It is – most probably like *Italki* population overall – multinational. This means that learner autonomy manifesting itself in the decision to learn on *Italki* is political in the sense that the tandem language education happens across borders, ignoring the administrative divisions in the contemporary world. Other borders the study participants cross are institutional: all of them chose to learn outside their own educational systems. This transpires from the answers of all ten *Italki* users but is most clearly visible in the personal learning network of User 7 (Figure 8). The amount of knowledge he seeks and finds out of his university shows how thin-walled he decided to make it. It also brings up the question of proportions and an observation that if such PLN-based education prevails in others like himself, the schooling systems worldwide could soon be facing a major revolution. Finally, based on User 7's CC experience network (Figure 10), we can note that exercising one's right to autonomous learning on *Italki* goes hand-in-hand with a new model of consumption: sharing economy; not to mention a manifestation of one's lifestyle. In this sense autonomous learning of this kind has political meaning and consequences, even if neither

User 7 nor any other of the *Italkers* studied admitted having a political agenda when undertaking tandem learning on the site.

When it comes to the spatial aspect of *Italki* learner autonomy, both the criteria of partnering of the 10 users and the "Japanese" node of User 7's PLN prove that the site is a place characterized by the freedom of choice rather than control. This freedom – to choose who you want to learn with; to come and go; to protect your privacy; to invest your identity (or not) – can be exercised because the social context under investigation is a truly thin-walled classroom.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that tandem language learning sites, like *Italki*, have a considerable potential to develop and reinforce learner autonomy. The results show that for some users autonomy may be more about learning *from* others, which coincides with pre-Web 2.0 construct of learner autonomy based on independence rather than interdependence. However, as it was admitted earlier in the text, based on a study as limited in terms of scope and depth as the present one, it is difficult to decide how social the autonomy of individual *Italki* users really is. This is why the study offers only some insights into the problem and delineates areas for further research rather than aspiring to any conclusions.

On a practical level, the pedagogical implications based on the present study will result in two recommendations. First of all, considering all its advantages as regards developing and reinforcing learner autonomy in its all three aspects, it seems advisable to encourage tandem language learning in the language classroom as an activity extracurricular to mainstream education. Secondly, sites like *Italki* should attract language teachers. If teachers are facing an inevitable paradigm change in education – or if they think it proper to induce such a change – the experience of the teacher as a learner in the thin-walled educational context (strongly advocated in Richardson and Mancabelli, 2011) is likely to give them a better insight into both the advantages of the interactive learning of languages as well as learner autonomy understood as a social construct.

References

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.

Cziko, G.A. (2004). Electronic tandem language learning (eTandem): A third approach to second language learning for the 21st century. *CALICO Journal,* 22(1), 25-39.

Dam, L. (1995). *Learner Autonomy 3: From Theory to Classroom Practice*. Dublin: Authentik.

Damasio, A. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*. London: Vintage.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (eds.) (2002). *Handbook of Self-Determination Research.* Rochester, NY: The University of Rochester Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (eds.), *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self* (pp. 9-42). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Hamari, J., Sjöklint, M., & Ukkonen, A. (2015). The sharing economy: Why people participate in collaborative consumption. Retrieved November 30, 2015, from http://people.uta.fi/~kljuham/2015-hamari_at_al-the_sharing_economy.pdf.

Hauck, M., Fuchs, C., & Müller-Hartmann, A. (2012). Promoting learner autonomy through multiliteracy skills development in cross-institutional exchanges. *Language Learning and Technology,* 16(3), 82-102.

Holec, R. (1981). *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning.* Oxford: Pergamon.

Huang, J., & Benson, P. (2013). Autonomy, agency and identity in foreign and second language education. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics,* 36(1), 7-28.

Jin, L. & Cortazzi, M. (1998). Expectations and questions in intercultural classrooms, *Intercultural Communication Studies,* 7(2), 37-62.

Legenhausen, L. (1999). Traditional and autonomous learners compared: the impact of classroom culture on communicative attitudes and behaviour. In C. Edelhoff and R. Weskamp (eds.), *Autonomes Fremdsprachenlernen* (pp. 166-82). Munich: Hueber.

Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.

Little, D. (1995). Learning as dialogue. The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System,* 23(2), 175-181.

Little, D. (1999). Developing learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: a social-interactive view of learning and three fundamental pedagogical principles. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses,* 38, 77-88.

Little, D. (2002).Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning. In: *The guide to good practice for learning and teaching in languages, linguistics and area studies*. University of Southampton: LTSN Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies. Retrieved November 30, 2015, from https://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1409.

Little, D. (2004). Constructing a theory of learner autonomy: Some steps along the way. In K. Mäkinen, P. Kaikkonen, & V. Kohonen (eds.), *Future Perspectives in Foreign Language Education* (pp. 15-25). Oulu: Publications of the Faculty of Education in Oulu University 101.

Murray, G. (2014). The social dimensions of learner autonomy and self – regulated learning. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal,* 5(4), 320–341.

Murray, G., Gao, X., & Lamb, T. (eds.) (2011). I*dentity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning*. Bristol-Buffalo-Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

Oh, S. & Syn, S. J. (2015). Motivations for sharing information and social support in social media: A comparative analysis of Facebook, Twitter, Delicious, YouTube, and Flickr. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology,* 66(10), 2045-2060.

O'Leary, C. (2014). Developing autonomous language learners in HE: A social constructivist perspective. In G. Murray (ed.), *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp. 15-36). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.

Oxford, R.L. (2003) Towards a systematic model of L2 learner autonomy. In D. Palfreyman and R.C. Smith (eds.), *Learner Autonomy Across Cultures: Language Education Perspectives* (pp. 75-91). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Palfreyman, D. (2003). Expanding the discourse on learner development: A reply to Anita Wenden. *Applied Linguistics,* 24 (2), 243-248.

Palfreyman, D. (2006). Social context and resources for language learning. *System,* 34(3), 352-370.

Ryan, S. M., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Self-regulation and the problem of human autonomy: Does psychology need choice, self-determination, and will? *Journal of Personality, 74*(6), 1557-1585.

Richards, K. (2006). 'Being the Teacher': Identity and classroom conversation. *Applied Linguistics,* 27(1), 51-77.

Richardson, W., & Mancabelli, R. (2011). *Personal Learning Networks. Using the Power of Connections to Transform Education.* Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.

Sade, L. A. (2011). Emerging selves, language learning and motivation through the lens of chaos. In G. Murray, X. Gao, & T. Lamb (eds.), *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp. 42-56). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Turula, A. (2006). *Language Anxiety and Classroom Dynamics. The Study of an Adult Beginner.* Bielsko Biała: Wydawnictwo Naukowe ATH.

Ushioda, E. (2006) Language motivation in a reconfigured Europe: Access, identity, autonomy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development,* 27(2), 148-161.

Ushioda, E. (2009). A person-in-context relational view of emergent motivation, self and identity. In Z. Dörnyei and E. Ushioda (eds.), *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self* (pp. 215-228). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Ushioda, E. (2011) Motivating learners to speak as themselves. In G. Murray, X. Gao and T. Lamb (eds.), *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp. 11-24). Bristol-Buffalo-Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

Ushioda, E., & Dörnyei, Z. (2012). Motivation. In S. Gass & A. Mackey (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 396-409). New York: Routledge.

Yashima, T. (2002) Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *Modern Language Journal,* 86(1), 54-66.

Zimmerman, B. (2013). From cognitive modeling to self-regulation: A social cognitive career path. *Educational Psychologist,* 48(3), 135-147.