

## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN Mario Rinvolucrí and Judith Baker

Transcribed and edited by Bryan Robinson

**M**ario Rinvolucrí has been a good friend of Greta since the Association's earliest days. It was only natural, therefore, that he should have been among the speakers invited to the X Jornadas Pedagógicas, held in September last year. During his stay in Granada, Bryan Robinson accepted the responsibility of recording a conversation with Mario on the subject of 'Learner Autonomy' to be published in this May issue of Greta as an appetiser for the coming December monograph on this topic. However, the tapes of that conversation disappeared at some time over the Christmas holidays never to be heard again, and so the transcript presented here is the result of a 'rescue mission' launched by Judith Baker, also of Pilgrims Language Courses, in which she and Mario gave up their lunch hour to produce the following conflicting, and at times controversial thoughts on how learner autonomy can be defined, and on what we as teachers can do to enhance the autonomy of our learners.

In preparation for their conversation, Mario and Judith used the set of handouts prepared by the 'Granada Learner Autonomy Group' and presented on the Saturday morning of the X Jornadas. Among other things, these looked at learning strategies which they equated with 'good language learning'; strategies such as 'openness to experimentation', or 'risk-taking'. In their conversation Judith and Mario agree with the presenters of that session on some points, but disagree sharply on many others. Mario goes as far as to dispute the assertion that autonomous learning can always be equated with effective learning, or that it should necessarily be considered a 'good thing'. As they talk, Judith and Mario bring up time and again the question of individual learning styles as they draw on their knowledge of the infant discipline of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)<sup>1</sup>. Their descriptions of learners they have worked with offer us model insights into the depth of awareness that we as teachers can aspire to obtaining about our own learners.

**J.B.** Mario, what is learner autonomy for you?

**M.R.** What is learner autonomy? Well, maybe, asking that question you have an idea in your own head as to how you'd define it?

**J.B.** Yeah, and I'm interested in the definition you've got in your own head.

**M.R.** (Laughs) Didn't work, did it? (More laughter) Emm?

**J.B.** No. I ask because ...

**M.R.** I have problems with the word 'learner autonomy'. I first came across it in Nancy, in France, being worked by people like, I've forgotten the man's name, Riley?, Philip Riley<sup>2</sup>? That's it. And what that meant there was simply that because the students', the adult students', the business students' timetables didn't fit with joining any group, em, they set up a Resource Centre for them which was fairly prototypal at the time, and got them to come in and work through worksheets, sheets on video and audio-

tapes, eh, and do a lot of reading of magazines and newspapers, and do a number of written exercises. They even got to the point of inviting them to do mumbling exercises<sup>3</sup> so that they could get oral practice. So, that was my initial understanding of learner autonomy.

**J.B.** What's the difference then between learner autonomy and self-access?

**M.R.** Well, they overlap very closely, and eh, perhaps self-access describes the organisational frame and learner autonomy describes what is hoped to be going on inside the student's head. Em?

**J.B.** D'you think self-access is the best way to develop learner autonomy?

**M.R.** No I don't at all. Eh, I think that this, the reason for thinking that [this] initiative is important, is that a lot of places in France, and in Spain, em, for example in Pamplona, are going this way. In Pamplona there's a guy<sup>4</sup> that

we're in contact with here in Pilgrims, em, who is developing self-access centres in the non-Opus Dei University, in the state University in Pamplona, in the Colegio Médico, em in a variety of other situations, and it's working. I mean, people are very happy to have him do this. So, it's a movement which is gaining momentum certainly in France, in the Châmbres de Commerce a lot, and in Spain. So, that's one of the reasons why it's uppermost in my mind. I agree with you, well I agree with what I think you think, which is that maybe it's not the best way of developing learner autonomy. What do you think?

J.B. Well, until you started speaking I hadn't really thought off self-access and learner autonomy as going together at all ...

M.R. Fine. Well, how would you have started this talk? If you hadn't so rudely interrupted my opening point.

J.B. (Laughs) I, em, I'm not going to talk for very long, but when I started to talk to you about learner autonomy I thought that you were going to talk about qualities in a learner ...

M.R. Aha.

J.B. ... because I think, I think that the whole issue around self-access in France, which I know better than Spain, has got to do with economics, with cutbacks in teacher funding, and that kind of thing ...

M.R. Ehuh.

J.B. ... so that they're encouraging people to do their own learning, but I don't think that that necessarily supports learner autonomy ...

M.R. Ehuh.

J.B. ... in fact people who aren't autonomous learners are rather unlikely to do well in self-access, aren't they? Are they?

M.R. I would agree. It's obvious that they're not, they're not likely to do well.

J.B. So what about learning situations which aren't self-access? Say in a group, what would learner autonomy be in a group learning situation? Is it a behaviour that you manifest? Or is it a state of mind? Or is it both?

M.R. Well I think, learner autonomy is quite difficult for students to achieve in many classes

where there is a mode of behaviour demanded by the teacher. And, eh, I became aware of this when observing the work of Peta Grey, in Cambridge, who would immediately try to get in tune with, try to get in step with the particular way that particular learners had of learning. And I'll give you a graphic example, em, there was a Turkish lad of eighteen. Bright. Knew a lot of German, came to improve his English for tourism, for tourism reasons, em, and he would often be out late at night, in Cambridge, and he'd come in in the morning completely zonked. He'd just about drag himself in. So what Peta did - Peta is a woman - em, she em, she organized cushions for him at the side of the room, so when he came in on zonked mornings, she said 'Mustafa, do you want to lie down?' And so Mustafa would go and lie down, and be quite quiet, and quite happy because he felt comfortable, and in the last five minutes of the lesson she would test him on what had gone on in the lesson, and he knew it better than most of the people in the group. Not because he had already known it before, because he wasn't the top of the class, but because genuinely having that physical need of lying down coped with and permitted, made his mind open. And his mind was a good mind, and it took in the stuff she was working on. So he was basically fish-bowling<sup>5</sup> from the side. One of the colleagues in that school when he walked in and found Mustafa lying on the cushions nearly exploded. Couldn't cope! It was complete lese-majesty, breaking of all rules, breaking of all rightnesses, how awful! Peta does the same sort of thing when coping with Japanese girls who get hungry before lunch: she gives them biscuits. In class. On the grounds that you can't study well if your body is saying 'no'. So that to me would be an extreme form of accepting that different people have different social ways of learning.

J.B. So learner autonomy has got, is inextricably linked with teacher behaviour?

M.R. I think that teacher behaviour is one of the things that makes it much harder.

J.B. What types of behaviour could teachers have that could help learner autonomy? I mean you've just given an example which involved ...

M.R. Can I throw that back to you, 'cos when you taught the All's Well<sup>6</sup> course, which you taught brilliantly, and very much in the mould in which it was intended, the Sagot, etc Dickinson mould, and I'm use, saying mould in a respectful way, not in a penicillin way, em. When you taught that how did you cope with different learner needs?

J.B. I think the main thing was allowing people not to participate in a way that was visible, if they didn't want to.

M.R. Did they have to contract out, or did you kind of make it very easy for them to not participate?

J.B. No, I would've just said it was Ok if they didn't take part. But, I mean that in a way was ... it's not as simple as it seems when I say it because the group would then start to exert its pressure on people to participate.

M.R. Yes, and at that time you were teaching with a kind of radiance of personality and enormous encompassing of the group, so that my impression was that in '82 and '83, you and the group made a very strong, powerful whole. So, a person contracting out would have to somehow take his courage in both hands and say 'Sod Judy! Sod the group!' and sort of manage to do it. It's a very moot point that 'I pass', that business, you can say 'I pass' in a round. It takes huge courage, and the whole of our pack, wolf pack background, is against it. In my own work, em I've tried to become more aware of different rhythms and different learning ways by doing very simple things like writing letters to students on an individual basis, and I found that changed my preparation totally. Because once I'd got into that one-to-one contact with students, em, I became too much aware of their individual preferences, dislikes, feelings, ways of expressing themselves, to dare to do 'x' or 'y' thing with the group. So it had an inhibiting effect on my behaviour with the group, but it had an enormously enhancing effect on the individual rapport I had with those students. And in those letters I was able to play whatever role seemed appropriate at the time. So some of the letters that I provoked from students, em, would be letters in which they gave me seminars, em, on the hydrology of

northern Spain - I'm thinking of one bloke, who clearly wasn't going to talk to me about his family happily, so he talked to me about his subject. I learned a lot about desalination, and also about salination, when you do a lot of irrigation. With other people I sometimes had written dialogues which got so hot and strong that I couldn't cope and had to back off because the emotional content was getting too burning and beyond what I could cope with as a relationship with those particular people. But it allowed me in terms of both topic and voice, written voice, to try to get into harmony with the student. To try, if you want in NLP terms to 'match'<sup>7</sup>, and sometimes 'be led by'<sup>8</sup>. 'To be led by' was the most skilful thing in that operation of writing letters. But it means you can no longer think of 'them' = the group. And it is not by chance that I went ... that I found this. I mean my own childhood was such that I didn't socialize properly until I was 13. I didn't go to primary school. And therefore it's almost inevitable that I seek one-to-one relationships with people I teach, 'cos that's me, deep model. But it has something to do with individualization, for sure.

J.B. And has individualization got anything to do with learning autonomously?

M.R. You don't see them as relatively synonymous?

J.B. I think that they might be ... no I don't see them as synonymous. I think they my go hand-in-hand. But I think that you, it may be possible to be an autonomous learner within a group, and appear to be doing the behaviour of the other group members, but you're ...

M.R. Thank God, always. That's always happening. I think that's a given. You can't tamper with that, and which is why I think that things like 'Learner Training', though that book by Sinclair and Ellis<sup>9</sup> was very well-meant, is terrible. How dare we talk about training, training learners, when we actually have the scantiest notion of how, of how they actually learn, now coming down to cognitive things, of the sort of things explored by both de la Garanderie<sup>10</sup> in France, and by the NLP guys in the States<sup>11</sup>.

J.B. Can you think of any one or two learners that you've had contact with that stick out as autonomous learners?

M.R. Well, the people I'm teaching this week. At the moment I'm in the luxury situation of teaching business people, and I'm teaching a couple. In the morning I teach him, and in the afternoon I teach her. He is almost entirely auditory in his way of learning. He learns through his ears. He doesn't really find the visual support, he doesn't find it even really relevant. I find that very hard to take on board, but he doesn't want it. He's sufficiently auditory, he lives a lot in kinesthetic, too, but he's sufficiently auditory to really, really seize things entirely through his ears. So, instead of, since he doesn't make notes, I put everything that I think is important, significant which he might want to revise on tape for him. Em, he is a person who lives at a very high overview level, em he lives in what is general, and he's also a brilliant mathematician, so he doesn't like extra bits, and he hates detail, and one of my dilemmas is how to get him to use bits of grammar, which are inevitably detailed, em without sort of getting in the way of the way he'd like to learn, which is almost to jump from content word to content word, to leap from meaning word to meaning word, and em, if I was teaching him again next week I would have to decide how I could circumvent this refusal, internal refusal, to cope with detail. One of the amazing things about him is that he absorbs, takes on board and remembers huge chunks of language that he gets, but it doesn't mean that his own utterances become more correct. His girlfriend is exactly opposite, she has inside her a castigating parent<sup>12</sup> which means that she must be perfect. She's very beautiful physically, and she, her appearance is close to perfect, and everything else seems to have to be like that, and she happens also to be very visual, so with her I do lots and lots of things on the board, lots of writing on bits of paper, I give her, and so on. Do dictationy-things with her sometimes. Em, and she is very happy to have intellectual explanation of details of language, so ... very different profile.

J.B. And I hear you're saying that autonomous is equal to having a very highly developed distinctive learning style. Are you?

M.R. Well, I think that pretty well everybody has that, highly developed learning style, except that when we're teaching a group of thirty, eh, it's very easy not to see those learning styles unless they become disruptive or the person isn't learning, and then we start worrying about them, but it's always going on. I mean, these two, could actually be in a group, and they'd somehow apply their way of coping with things to whatever was going on in the class. Have you come across people who've had very strikingly special learning styles?

J.B. The person that I, who I've worked with who I think had the most autonomous learning style was also one of the most effective learners I've ever come across, it was also in a one-to-one situation, em. He was a Spanish banker, and he couldn't go ahead in his job without mastering English, and I worked with him for, I think, about six weeks, and over those six weeks even though we started from zero English, he immediately put into practice all sorts of different strategies for learning. Em, he moved in the classroom, he drew in the classroom, he listened, he wasn't shy about trying to speak. And after each class he went away and categorized all the information that he had in a way that was very systematic and meaningful to him and he was able to learn it in time for the next class ... and he, I had the feeling, after a while, that he was leading me in my teaching, he was helping to teach me how he learnt, because he was so very open. And I guess I'm saying that openness to experimentation and risk-taking for me is a very important quality of an autonomous learner.

M.R. Mmmm, but you could be autonomous and not like that too. It's a bit, I find it a bit dangerous to be attributing efficiency values to different learning styles because ...

J.B. I guess that's what I was trying to ask you before ...

M.R. ... who's to know? I mean, who's to compare?

J.B. I thought that the particular autonomous learner that I was thinking about was open to risk-taking.

M.R. Yes, but it doesn't have to be that way, does it?. There will be other learners who will not take any risks, will stay within known text, and from known text will, in its full time, will blossom genuine creative language.

J.B. But how can you call that autonomous? If they stay within a frame that's ...

M.R. Because they're autonomous in the sense that they're not being messed about by their peers or by the teacher. That's, their taking on board of text is their way of going about it, and who's to deny them that right? What becomes scary is when one of those ways becomes institutionalised like the Qur'anic learning, Qur'anic learning, the Muslim learning of the Qur'an where taking on texts in a repetitive, memorizing way is what you must do.

J.B. So does that mean that you think that autonomy is allowing yourself to learn in the way that is best for you?

M.R. Well, not being stopped by either the institution, or the teacher, or your mates. I mean one thing with the two people I'm working with at the moment, is that neither of them can stand being in a classroom, partly because they can't smoke in this building, but partly because they feel that a café is a much better place to be. And they actually talk better down in that café than up here.

J.B. So autonomy isn't necessarily equated for you with effective learning?

M.R. No, certainly not. 'Cos of course there may be strategies which don't serve a person well. And therefore learner training may have its place, but not until we know something. Even an area like NLP is still in its infancy in terms of knowing how people actually learn, but we won't really know how people learn, Judy, until the neuro-scientists, not the NLP people, neuro-scientists actually manage to plot what goes on chemically in the brain when language is being learned.

J.B. Mmmm. I just get the idea from reading these papers from the [Granada Learner] Autonomy Group<sup>13</sup> that learner autonomy is seen to be a good thing in a learner, and what you're saying is challenging that to a certain extent.

M.R. Yes, I fully agree with the NLP thinking that what we have to do is to find out how people do things, before we dare to make any judgements about what's efficient and inefficient. And at the moment, I mean, there are theories around, but none of them are proven. We can't possibly lay down any laws. I mean those stupid studies - there's a Canadian report<sup>14</sup> - which talk about 'the good language learner' as being on the whole extrovert, on the whole this, that and the other, are absurd. What are you going to do with someone like Chris Sion,<sup>15</sup> who likes mumbling to himself? Who lives with eyes down left<sup>16</sup>, and has actually produced a book of talking to yourself exercises. Who's publishing company has until recently been called the Desert Island Publishing company? He's a language trainer!

J.B. So, our ideas of good language learning and autonomy are not necessarily synonymous at all?

M.R. No. You can be autonomous inefficiently or efficiently.

J.B. Yeah. So what would you say to something like 'an autonomous learner learns to think in a language that they're learning'?

M.R. Well, I think that describes a stage of a process of learning which is to do with having reached a certain level in the language. I would say further than 'learns to think', 'learns, learns to feel', or possibly the 'feel' might come before the 'think'. Certainly in the work of Bernard Dufeu in *Psychodramaturgie linguistique*<sup>17</sup> you start off by feeling in the language well before you begin to semanticize, well before you can grasp meaning. But I mean, what you've just suggested is, what you've read out there is, suggests a level that's been reached. And sometimes when you get, meet Japanese adult learners who've been taught totally grammar-translationwise, you can see that they can't yet think in English even though they have loads of exponents ...

J.B. Yeah.

M.R. ... they really are mentally translating in an up-front way. Which means that when they're listening you have to repeat [yourself], and when they're speaking you have to wait before each utterance. It's a long process.

J.B. So I'm, I'll just pursue this because I think that from what I read from these papers, 'good language learning' is being equated with 'being strongly autonomous', or 'being autonomous' is being equated with 'good language learning'. [Quoting] 'Good language learners ... are the students who are willing to take risks' - Well, we've talked about that and you've disputed that already - 'Create opportunities for practising the language in and outside of the classroom' Now is that 'autonomous'?

M.R. Well, that suggests that they're keen, that they want to practise. Is it 'autonomous' to go and do your recorder practice? In a sense I suppose it is. Yes. It depends whether the motivation is sufficient to carry them on to doing things outside, outside the, beyond the eye of the teacher.

J.B. Ok. Here's one: 'Find a style of learning that suits you.'

M.R. They've got one! It's, it's absolute, absolute nonsense! It's hubristic! It's arrogant!

J.B. Makes you ....

M.R. That's right. It's awful! They have a style of learning, and one of the things that is so interesting, and which Paul Davies<sup>18</sup>, Barbara Garside<sup>19</sup> and I are trying to do in the book we're preparing on Student Action Research is help them to find mechanisms to help them become aware of the incredibly brilliant things, and disfunctional things that they are doing when they try to learn.

J.B. Well I think everybody's got a learning style, and everyone's got a learning style that serves them in a certain way, but some people have found a learning style which suits them which doesn't suit the environment in which they're learning ...

M.R. Absolutely! I fully agree. And for me autonomy is largely social autonomy to free yourself to be able to do what is right for you, like your Spanish banker, he was lucky to have found a teacher who was willing to follow him. But some don't have the security to do what you did, because it takes security to allow the person to go their own way. You have to be a good rider to allow the horse to choose the road.

J.B. 'Realise that language learning is not easy'

M.R. Oh, I think that's got to do with the feelings and fears of some [teachers]. Em, I think that for some people language learning is superbly easy.

J.B. 'Develop techniques for practice and memorisation.'

M.R. You see I think that some people just have it inside them. Em, Herbert Puchta<sup>20</sup> was telling me about a nine year- old who, what did he do? When he was remembering something he'd seen in his English book, em, he saw the words screening across in front of him, but at the same time in an insistent way he heard the words. You know, like a tune when you can't get [it] out of your head, which is involuntary, and comes back and back and back without your control. He heard them that way, and Herbert said 'Well, are they in your voice? Your Mum's voice? What's ...?' 'No, they're in your voice, Mister Puchta' Em, and he, but he didn't invent that: that was what his physiomy was getting him to do in the situation. It was, in fact, very effective for him. It might not work for you.

J.B. It might be a bit much for me!

M.R. And the other thing about his example which is important to me is the fact that the auditory part, which was obviously powerful for him, came back involuntarily. It means that how can you set that in position? That's what's coming up. It's almost as paradoxical as deciding what you're going to dream. I know there are some people who've tried that, but, em, that's a natural thing that happens.

J.B. What about 'takes responsibility for their own learning'? They say 'a good learner takes responsibility for his or her own learning.'

M.R. Well if [teachers] really believed that they wouldn't give [learners] marks, would they? Because if you actually believe that, em, giving people marks is completely absurd.

J.B. But before, when we were talking about autonomy, I think this is the part of the definition which comes closest to what you were talking about as autonomy, isn't it? 'taking responsibility for your own learning'.

M.R. Yeah, yeah.

J.B. So how might the way that we behave as teachers help people to take responsibility for their own learning?

M.R. First of all, accepting with wonderment that it's going to be different for each person, and finding that normal, completely normal,

And two, trying to find ways of not standing in the way of that happening. It's really, in a way, more negative than anything else, and not marching in with a firm preconception of what's good for everybody. We've become a bit more discovery-oriented ourselves, rather than experienced and convinced.

### Notes:

1. Perhaps the most accessible introductory book is O'CONNOR, J.; SEYMOUR, J.; *Introducing Neuro-linguistic Programming*. London & San Francisco: Aquarian Press, 1993.
2. RILEY, Philip, co-author with Edith Harding of *The Bilingual Family*. Cambridge: CUP, 1986.
3. Exercises in which learners are asked to vocalise texts they may later be expected to use in communication activities, as a way of preparing themselves.
4. Walter Lockhart and Javier Elcarte. Lockhart College/Servicios Lingüísticos de Navarra, Avda. Baja Navarra 47, 31002 Pamplona. Tel: (948) 22 60 93; Fax: (948) 22 65 28.
5. Observing what's going on, but without being in any way involved.
6. SAGOT; LEVEQUE; DICKINSON; *All's well*. Didier-Hatier, 1976. A highly participative, audio-visual based course.
7. 'Matching: Adopting parts of another person's behaviour for the purpose of enhancing rapport' (O'CONNOR & SEYMOUR 1993:243).
8. 'Leading: Changing your own behaviours with enough rapport for the other person to follow' (O'CONNOR & SEYMOUR 1993:242).
9. ELLIS, G.; SINCLAIR, B.; *Learning to Learn English*. Cambridge: CUP, 1990.
10. GARANDERIE, Antoine de la; *Le Dialogue Pédagogique avec l'élève*. Centurion/Bayard, 1984. Les Profils Pédagogiques. Centurion/Bayard, date unknown.
11. John Grinder, Robert Bandler, and Robert Dilts are just three of the most significant 'names' in the history of the development of NLP. Their work, and that of many others, appears in 'A Guide to NLP books', an annotated bibliography included in O'CONNOR & SEYMOUR (1993).
12. This expression comes from the world of Transactional Analysis (TA), a theory of social intercourse. In BERNE, E.; *Games People Play*. London: Penguin, 1967, a clear, simple account of TA explaining terms such as the one Mario Rinvolucri uses, is given.
13. Handouts distributed during the Greta X Jornadas session.
14. NAIMAN, N.; FROHLICH, M.; STERN, H.; TODESCO, A.; 'The Good Language Learner', in *Research in Education* N° 7. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1978.
15. Chris Sion has worked with Pilgrims as a teacher, teacher trainer, and publications editor since the 1970s. Among other books he has recently published *Talking to Yourself in English Book 1 (Intermediate) and Book 2 (Advanced)* (Desert Island Books, 1993) offering over 100 self-study activities encouraging learners to 'talk to themselves'. These are obtainable from Burg Waszinkstraat 71, 6417 CV Herlen, Netherlands.
16. In NLP, this indicates the speaker is involved in 'inner dialogue', that is 'talking to him or herself' (O'CONNOR & SEYMOUR 1993:36).
17. DUFEU, B.; *Teaching Myself*. Oxford: OUP, 1994.
18. Lecturer in the School of English at the University of Durham, and co-author with Mario Rinvolucri, of books such as *Dictation*, Cambridge: CUP, 1988, and *The Confidence Book*, Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1990.
19. GARSIDE, Barbara, co-author with Paul Davies and Mario Rinvolucri, of *Student Action Research*. Cambridge: CUP, forthcoming.
20. Co-author, with Michael Schratz, of *Teaching Teenagers*. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1990, Herbert has worked with Pilgrims as a teacher and teacher trainer since the early 1980s.