

Column: Teacher Reflections

Reflection on the Interrelationships between Learner and Teacher Autonomy

by Kyoko Gruendel

Have you been contemplating something about your teaching or classroom experiences? In this column, we invite anyone to share their reflections with us. Please contact the editor if you would like to contribute an installment or if you just have an idea you would like to run by her. We look forward to the next installment of "Teacher Reflections."

In order to foster students' autonomous language learning, teachers themselves must display a degree of autonomy in their approaches to teaching and learning (Benson, 2011). In recent years, many teachers talk about how important it is for their students to be autonomous in their learning. How could teachers ever know how to promote their students' autonomy if teachers themselves are not autonomous? Little says, "...since learning arises from interaction and interaction is characterized by interdependence, the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers" (Little, 1995, p. 175). Since teachers influence learners in a great way by interacting with them in classrooms, it is important for teachers to be autonomous and show their autonomous approaches in their own teaching and learning. In this article, I would like to share my opinions and reflection on the interrelationships between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy.

Before I took the Learner Autonomy course that Kanda University of International Studies offers in their MA program, I thought I could somehow encourage my learners to improve their English skills without much effort on my side. Subconsciously I knew I needed to motivate my students to learn the English language autonomously in the classroom as well as outside of the classroom. However, I didn't exactly know how I could motivate or encourage them to do so. Moreover, I didn't know what inner qualities teachers needed to have for their students to be autonomous learners.

When I was a college student, I had an opportunity to study in California. However, my father was against the idea by suggesting that I study English in Japan largely

because of our financial situation. As I have been a determined person since my childhood, I decided to immerse myself in an English environment by employing many ways to keep studying English, such as go to an English language school to interact with my teachers in English, watch movies in English, and so on. The more I studied English, the more I realized how I should study and analyzed the next steps to improve my English skills. It took studying every single day till I could use English freely at work - until then, it had seemed to me there was no light at the end of the tunnel. It is an important realization to have that acquiring a foreign language is a time investment our students should be prepared for.

Looking back on the way I studied English, I can say that I was an autonomous learner. I learned to have perseverance and dedicate myself to improving my English language skills. I also reflected on my language learning and had a positive attitude toward it. When I was tired of studying by myself, I went out to a language school or to see my foreign friends to interact with them to produce some output. It was stimulating to know I could express my opinions and feelings and understand what they said in English. This kept my motivation high.

I was a very proactive student who took initiatives trying different studying methods. I even visited teachers' offices at high school and college to ask them questions or interact with them, including native English teachers. Besides the English language, they taught me the importance of self-education, having a positive attitude, practising autonomous learning, and keeping high motivation. They greatly influenced me with those factors both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

The Learner Autonomy course I took at Kanda changed my whole perspective of language teaching and learning. As an English learner myself, I can now see what factors may encourage learners to be autonomous. I also began to think there must be close interrelationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. The following items indicate ways in which autonomous teachers can foster learner autonomy:

1. Dialogue and inquiry. I try to take some time to talk to or ask my students questions about lessons and activity contents to improve my teaching skills and approaches, just like I asked my high school English teachers and professors about how I could improve my English language skills. I consider my students as my teachers in that sense. I believe autonomous teachers keep asking themselves and their own learners about how they can foster autonomous learning for their own students.

2. Dialogue and reflection. I reflect more on my teaching and my role. I reflect before, during, and after lessons. This is also why I ask my students and myself more questions related to my teaching. I also keep reflective journals. Writing journals related to teaching makes me think about how I can improve my teaching and my role as a teacher, and also how I can help my learners become more autonomous.

3. Positive attitude. I believe that autonomous teachers tend to have a positive attitude and show their trust in the students to have a capacity to learn autonomously. By this I mean that teachers should be equipped with this belief in their students' ability if they want to promote learners' autonomy.

4. Continuous support. Based on my experience, autonomous teachers are more likely to keep assisting their students until they can reach the goals they set for themselves. Since learning a foreign language is an interactive process that involves others, teachers' continuous support related to their students' performance and interaction can lead to their learners becoming more autonomous.

5. Proactive, continuous development of teacher autonomy. Teachers need to be open to continuous improvement and development of their skills and knowledge. This is a sign of teacher autonomy and by itself further develops teacher autonomy. Language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner

autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous (Little, 1995). I started educating myself more by attending lectures and taking classes at my graduate school related to teaching. By doing so, I have applied some of their teaching methods to my teaching context and put them into practice.

6. Awareness-raising. Autonomous teachers can raise students' awareness to be more responsible for what they study and how they study because they were once learners who raised awareness of their own language learning. Raising the awareness of one's own learning and gaining an understanding of the process involved is thus an important key to the development of autonomous learning (Benson, 2011).

7. Motivation. Motivation is one of the key factors in learning a language (Dornyei, 2001) and teachers play a pivotal role in providing and encouraging it. If teachers are not motivated, how would they know how to motivate their students? I think autonomous teachers can deeply understand the value of motivation and how they can utilize it to enhance their learners' autonomy in their classes.

8. Encouraging learner control. "Accounts of experiments in which learners are encouraged to take a degree of control over the planning and assessment of classroom learning are mostly positive and tend to show that learners are able to exercise control over aspects of the learning given the opportunity to do so and appropriate support" (Benson, 2011, p. 173). I pair up my students, sometimes encourage peer-teaching, choosing from available resources, and encourage decision-making for the lesson contents and homework assignment tasks. In this way they take more responsibility for their own decisions and engage more in their own learning. Autonomous teachers, because of their own understanding of the importance of autonomy, tend to be more comfortable giving their learners more control.

I came to realize that there must be some interrelationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy because of students' interaction with their teachers. For this reason, I believe that through their interaction, autonomous teachers influence their students with the factors I mentioned above. Since I started taking the Learner Autonomy course that I mentioned earlier, I noticed that my teaching approach changed my students'

actions and behaviors. For example, they started becoming more autonomous by sending me e-mails in English, practicing reading short stories and articles from 10 to 20 times without me telling them, listening to English programs on the radio or on TV, and watching movies in English outside the classroom.

Since there has not been much research done, the interrelationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are not yet fully understood. In this article I offered a very limited analysis based on my subjective experiences and reflection, as well as observations of my students' (and my own) attitudes, actions, and behavior. If an opportunity arises in the future, I would like to conduct some deeper research on the interrelationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy.

The one very important thing I learned from writing this reflection is that as long as I teach, I will keep learning with the factors above in mind as a teacher and learner myself. Finally, I would like to end my paper with my favorite citation: "Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are closely linked and without sufficient knowledge and guidance, teachers are unlikely to develop the skills to be able to foster learner autonomy in their own classrooms" (Reinders & Balcikanli, 2011).

References

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