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The Interrelationships Between Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy

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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 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, pp. 175). Since teachers influence learners in a great way by interacting with learners in classrooms, it is important for teachers to be autonomous and show their autonomous approaches in their teaching and learning. In this paper, I would like to share my opinions and reflect on the interrelationships between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy.

Before I took the Learner Autonomy course¹, I just thought somehow, I could encourage my learners to improve their English skills without making much effort on my side. Somehow subconsciously I knew I needed to motivate my students to learn 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 elements 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 carrying out many ways to keep studying English. The more I studied English, the more I knew how I should study and analyze my next step to improve my English skills. I kept carrying it out every single day until I could freely use English at work. I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel at the time. Looking back on the way I studied English, I can say that I was an autonomous learner. Acquiring a foreign language requires a life-long learning process, and it is a time

¹ Part of the MA TESOL course offered at Kanda University of International Studies Graduate School in Tokyo, Japan.

investment. Therefore, I learned to have perseverance and dedicate myself to improving my English language skills. I also reflected on my English language learning and had a positive attitude toward it. When I was tired of studying, I went to a language school or to see my foreign friends to interact with them to produce ‘output’. It was stimulating to know how 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 to try 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 English language, they taught me the importance of self-education, positive attitudes, autonomous learning, and keeping high motivation. They greatly influenced me with those factors in the classroom and outside the classroom.

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

Dialogue and inquiry: I try to take some time to talk to or to 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.

Dialogue and reflection: I reflect more on my teaching and 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 write my reflective journals. Writing my own 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 autonomous.

Positive attitude: I believe that autonomous teachers tend to have a positive attitude to believe that students have a capacity to learn autonomously. I started having a positive attitude toward my students’ capacity to be able to learn more autonomously in and outside the

classroom. By this I mean that teachers should be equipped with their belief in their students' capacity to learn autonomously if we want to promote learners' autonomy.

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

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 itself further develops teacher autonomy. The development of teacher autonomy is also one of the key factors for students to develop their own 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, 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.

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, p 107).

Motivation: Motivation is one of the key factors in learning a language (Dörnyei, 2001). 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 to be autonomous in their teaching. I believe that this value that autonomous teachers have can help their learners acquire their target language.

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 their decision-making for their lesson contents and homework assignment tasks. This

way, they take more responsibility for their own decisions and they engage more in their learning. Autonomous teachers, because of their own understanding of the importance of autonomy, tend to be more comfortable giving their learners more control.

Since there has not been much research done, the interrelationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are not yet fully understood. This is only my analysis and notions based on my subjective experiences and reflection. After I took the Learner Autonomy class, I came to realize that there must be some interrelationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy because of students' interaction with their teachers in their language learning. 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, my whole 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. Therefore, also in my experience with my own autonomous learning and teaching I strongly believe teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interrelated and intertwined.

This is a very limited analysis based on my observations toward my students' attitude, actions and behavior of their autonomous learning including mine. If an opportunity arises in the future, I would like to conduct some research about the interrelationships between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy.

One very important thing I learned from this reflection paper and this course 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, p. 22)

Notes on the Contributor

Kyoko Gruendel is a graduate student with Kanda University of International Studies. She teaches adult learners at her school. Her research interests include motivational/affective learning, autonomous learning, and teacher development.

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