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Current Issues in Teacher Autonomy

ABSTRACT. This paper provides a review of a selection of the literature in the field of English foreign language teaching related to teacher autonomy. The focus is on the core themes recurring in the literature, which comprise: rationale for teacher autonomy, definitions of the concept, descriptions of an autonomous teacher, recognition of the constraints on autonomy and suggestions for teacher education promoting teacher autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Autonomy, conceived of as “a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action” (Little 1991), has recently become one of the most widely discussed problems in education in general as well as in the teaching of English as a foreign language. During the past decades a lot has been written about learner autonomy and the topics range from theoretical and empirical considerations to practical tips how to foster autonomy in the English foreign language classroom (for a comprehensive review see Benson 2007). Yet, the number of articles or book chapters on *teacher* autonomy is significantly smaller and the subject matter is underresearched although authors emphasize the importance of teacher autonomy for foreign language learners and for the teachers themselves. What is more, studies beyond ELT revealed a close relationship between teacher autonomy and teachers’ motivation, job satisfaction, professionalism, and stress (Pearson and Moomaw 2006). The core issues relating to teacher autonomy and considered in the relevant literature include attempts to define teacher autonomy, provide a rationale for teacher autonomy, describe the characteristics of an autonomous teacher, analyze the constraints on teacher autonomy, and finally, to give suggestions for teacher education for autonomy.

This overview attempts to pull together the issues highlighted in the literature in order to outline a comprehensive view of teacher autonomy in English language teaching and situate it within a number of factors that are likely to effect teacher autonomy. Each of these issues will be discussed in the following sections. However, there are some broad areas which, though directly related to teacher autonomy, e.g. teacher research, action research, self-development, cannot be included in this review due to the limits of space.

2. RATIONALE FOR TEACHER AUTONOMY

The need for teacher autonomy is most often justified by exposing the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy (Little 1991, 1995, 2000, Thavenius 1999, Aoki 2002). Little (1991, 1995, 2004) believes that teacher autonomy is a prerequisite to learner autonomy and consequently teachers who are not autonomous themselves will not be able to help learners in this difficult process of becoming autonomous. Aoki (2002) goes even further, saying pointedly that autonomy is a must for a teacher who is to foster learner autonomy. Little's argument for teacher autonomy is based on two assumptions. The first one acknowledges the crucial role teachers play in their interpretation of the curriculum and its practical realisation in the classroom. No two teachers will teach and behave in the classroom in the same way due to their individual approaches to their job. The second assumption is based on teacher's participation in classroom negotiations for which the teacher must be prepared, since they comprise a variety of factors such as the aims and objectives of a language course/lesson, materials, methods, activities, evaluation, learner and teacher roles (Crabbe 1993, Little 1993, 1995, 1999, Dam 1995, Voller 1997). Thus, before letting students discuss what their priorities are, the teacher needs to decide first to what extent she may open the space for negotiations. The extent to which a teacher is ready to open that space for negotiations in the classroom is determined by how teachers perceive the constraints on learners' autonomy, how they interpret them and cope with them (Benson 2000).

There is also another sense in the link between learner and teacher autonomy. As Smith (2001) and Kohonen (2003) observe, teachers and learners can learn together and create a culture of collaboration in the pursuit of autonomy. According to Kohonen the enhancement of learner autonomy depends on the social learning environment and school culture in which teachers and learners work together as a collaborative learning community. In order to create the culture in which learners are guided towards autonomy in language learning and in learning in general teacher collaboration and professional autonomy are required.

The idea of teacher autonomy as indispensable for the development of learner autonomy is widespread, whereas the value of teacher autonomy for the teachers' personal and professional lives is somewhat hidden and probably will require more exposure and research.

3. DEFINING TEACHER AUTONOMY

Defining teacher autonomy poses a number of problems since it is a multifaceted concept. The literature does not provide many definitions of teacher autonomy, rather attempts have been made to describe the concept. In the discussions of teacher autonomy a few recurring themes can be identified:

- teacher-learner autonomy,
- teacher autonomy as an attribute of teacher professionalism,
- teacher autonomy as a teacher's right,
- freedom from control of others.

There is perhaps a need to also recognise the importance of teacher autonomy as communicator for it is one of the most vital roles a teacher performs in the foreign language classroom. Each of these areas will be briefly discussed below, yet we must remember that sometimes they intermingle and cannot be separated.

Teacher-learner autonomy

Little believes that autonomy is an inherent characteristic of successful teachers when he writes that:

Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers. (1995: 179)

In this statement he puts forward qualities which have been used to describe learner autonomy. Hence, an autonomous teacher is responsible, reflective and able to control her actions. Further he goes on to explain that teachers should first experience autonomy as learners in order to be able to implement autonomy in the classroom. This is supported by research reported by Vieira, which she concludes with the following statement: "teachers, as learners, become involved in a process of autonomization, thus feeling more empowered to take charge of their own course of action" (1999: 155).

The importance of teacher-as-learner autonomy has been recognised by Smith (2000) on the basis of his own experience in foreign language learning. He insists that teachers should experience learner autonomy first because this will help them to understand learners and the problems they encounter in the course of autonomization. Smith also points to the need of discussing teacher autonomy in acquiring pedagogical skills in the future.

Teacher autonomy as teacher professionalism

Summing up the work in teacher education, Smith (2000) concludes that learning is crucial not only in teacher education but also in lifelong teacher professional development. In a similar vein McGrath (2000) and Kohonen (2003) make references to teacher autonomy as self-directed professional development and one's control over this development. As McGrath suggests that teacher autonomy can be exercised via teacher research, action research, reflective practice, and teacher development activities. Teachers, in order to become autonomous professionals, need, similarly to learners, careful preparation both at a psychological and technical level.

Tort-Moloney (1997: 51) refers to an autonomous teacher as "one who is aware of why, when, where and how pedagogical skills can be acquired in the self-conscious awareness of teaching practice itself". The emphasis is put here on teachers and their ability and willingness to control their learning and teaching. This approach assumes reflection on the teaching process and positions teachers in the role of learners, learners of teaching. If learning constitutes an important part of becoming and developing as a teacher, then definitions of learner autonomy will apply to teacher autonomy as well. The issue of awareness also was taken up by Thavenius (1999). She defines teacher autonomy as "the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their learning (1999: 160). However, from her point of view, a key issue in teacher autonomy is awareness of learners' learning processes and the teacher's own role in these processes. The development of teacher awareness and autonomy may proceed from level one, where a teacher "*describes* students' work with self-directed learning without actually reflecting" through level two when teacher "*reflects* on students' work and autonomy development" to eventually reach level three at which teacher "*reflects* on her *own* autonomy development and awareness process" (Thavenius 1999: 161). This process is obviously long and painstaking, requiring a high degree of support of teacher trainers and the social environment.

Teacher autonomy as teachers' right to freedom from control

From the liberal-humanist and critical-emancipatory point of view autonomy is one of the fundamental rights of an individual who is naturally inclined to self-organize and self-initiate their actions in accordance with their values and interests. From this perspective autonomy is regarded as a right of both learners' and teachers' (Benson 2000). Learners learn and teachers teach within the constraints imposed by the system. Thus, teacher autonomy is concerned with the teachers' willingness and ability to explore and overcome these constraints in order to enable learners to exercise their autonomy. Autonomy, seen as freedom from control by others, is understood as the way in which the teacher responds to macro- and microconstraints on her autonomy and to what extent they are able to exercise independent judgements (McGrath 2000).

Aoki (2002: 111) makes use of a definition of learner autonomy and applies it to teachers. For her teacher autonomy is the "capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching", however she considers this definition as not satisfactory since it does not take account of teachers' capacity to foster learner autonomy. From her point of view teacher autonomy is directly linked to learner autonomy and aims at supporting it.

Teacher autonomy as communicator

It seems, however, that one important area has been neglected in the discussions of teacher autonomy, that is the link between teacher autonomy and communication. The interdependence of communication and language learning or learner autonomy has been discussed by some researchers (e.g. Little 1991, 1993, 1994, 1991, 1995, 1999, Littlewood 1996, Benson 2002, Thomsen 2003), but has not been expanded on teacher autonomy. If foreign language teachers are supposed to teach learners to communicate in the target language they should be able to communicate independently and freely in classroom and outside classroom situations. There are several reasons for this. First of all teachers are language models for their learners, sometimes even the only models. Besides, it has been identified that insufficient English proficiency may be a hindrance to effective communicative language teaching. Moreover, teachers who cannot communicate freely in unpredictable situations may feel great foreign language anxiety in the classroom which leads to routine, predictable and controlled interactions, fixed procedures, and adherence to the textbook (Hiramatsu 2005). Those teachers, not being autonomous in respect to foreign language communication, are unlikely to

support learner autonomy within this field. It might be assumed that the lack of autonomy as communicator may be one of the most prominent obstacles to teacher autonomy.

Summing up, teacher autonomy so far has been viewed in technical terms as their ability to take control of their teaching, and in more psychological terms, as their willingness and capacity to do so. It has also been discussed as a political concept, which acknowledges the teacher's right to freedom from control of others and to independent, responsible action. Teacher autonomy is exercised at different levels, which may overlap at times: autonomy as learners of the target language and of pedagogical skills (manifested in the ability to pursue one's own course of development, considering language proficiency and teaching skills), autonomy as teachers (ability to make independent choices concerning teaching and education; ability to develop), autonomy as communicators (ability to use language freely and independently in new situations; ability to use language to communicate meanings in the classroom and in other settings). Teacher autonomy will also be exercised at a personal level. A teacher's professional life first of all supports learners, but it must be subordinated to the teacher's general life goals. According to Aoki and Hamakawa (2003) teachers' professional lives must be considered within the broad context of their personal lives and personal agendas for development and cannot be separated from them. For Kohonen,

Being an autonomous person implies respecting one's own dignity as a moral person and valuing others by treating them with corresponding dignity. Human dignity involves moral agency, in the sense of being aware of one's own conduct and its effects on others. (2003: 147)

This statement sheds additional light on teacher autonomy. Autonomy exercised on a personal level exerts an influence on the teacher and learner relationship.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTONOMOUS TEACHERS

Theoretical considerations on the nature of teacher autonomy are operationalized into concrete expectations towards teachers. An overview of the literature makes it possible to identify a variety of characteristics that autonomous teachers are supposed to display. Teachers who aim at developing learner autonomy and control the teaching process continually reflect on this process and their role in it (Little 1991, 1995, Thavenius 1999, Vieira 1999, Lamb 2000, Little 2000, Aoki 2002, Huttunen 2003, Smith 2003).

A teacher's ability to reflect on her own autonomy or its lack and on her job is one of the features that is present in the majority of descriptions of teacher autonomy. According to Little (2000), if a teacher is to develop a capacity for self-directed teaching, she must be able to take a reflective stance towards her job.

Thavenius (1999) describes an autonomous teacher as one who is willing to share responsibility with learners, to help learners to discover their individual needs, change the power balance in the classroom. She implies that for a teacher to engage in enhancing learner autonomy is connected with changing her personality. According to the "Shizuoka" definition (Barfield et al. 2002) autonomous teachers demonstrate an inquiring attitude to their work, searching for the best ways of fostering learner autonomy. Preferably they work in collaboration with other teachers, which is helpful in teacher development and makes overcoming constraints on autonomy easier. Teachers cooperate with their learners and take full responsibility for the development of learner autonomy. Autonomous teachers are willing to develop both personally and professionally.

5. CONSTRAINTS ON TEACHER AUTONOMY

Teaching does not happen in a vacuum, all teaching is situated and therefore is conditioned by various factors which may either hinder or promote teacher autonomy. Considering constraints on teacher autonomy, external and internal factors need to be recognised. By internal constraints we understand those which belong to the teacher, such as the teacher's personality, experience, education, beliefs and theories, attitudes, motivation, economic status, work load (Wiśniewska 2003). External constraints may be considered at two levels. At a macro level, these are: educational philosophy, the state, its educational policy and goals, language teaching policy, the curriculum, materials and methods. At a micro level these are: the school community and its goals, local and school authorities, peers, parents, learners (McGrath 2000, Aoki 2002). Benson (2000: 116) refers to the constraints at a micro-level as institutional constraints which involve "rules and regulations, certifications, examinations, curricula, the physical and social organization of the school and classroom practices (...)". At a macro level Benson mentions policy constraints, conceptions of language and language teaching methodologies (op.cit.). Besides, the learner and his autonomy may limit teachers autonomy and her willingness to foster learner autonomy (Wiśniewska 2003). As Aoki (2002: 115) explains:

Teachers who aim to support their learners' autonomy are never entirely free to make their own choices, however, because their choices are necessarily constrained

by learners' needs and wishes (...) it is the responsibility of pro-autonomy teachers to make choices not in the service of their own needs and wishes, but in the service of the needs and wishes of their learners.

Albeit the discussions of constraints on teacher autonomy are quite widespread it would be desirable to examine in more detail their role in autonomy enhancement and how the constraints could be changed into stimuli.

6. TEACHER DEVELOPMENT FOR AUTONOMY

As Little (1995) said, "learner autonomy becomes a matter for teacher education", this review closes with references to studies on educational initiatives and proposals concerning foreign language teacher development for autonomy.

Little (1991, 1995, 2004) cautions that for teachers to be able to develop learners and their own autonomy cannot be taught in an expository mode but must experience autonomy as learners first. Hence in teacher education the same techniques should be used as teachers are expected to use with their learners, such as negotiation, collaboration, reflection, scaffolding target language use, using writing to develop speaking, etc. Additionally, trainee teachers should be equipped with skills which will help them develop learner autonomy. Aoki (2002) makes some more suggestions concerning fostering teacher autonomy. Firstly, a supportive institutional milieu is needed. Secondly, the curriculum should be flexible enough for teachers to make choices, explore, etc. Thirdly, a psychologically safe environment and a positive atmosphere are required, as well as trust between prospective teachers and their educators.

Smith (2003) emphasizes the need to engage teachers in reflection, especially through action research, and when collaboration with other teachers is possible. This is supported by the results of a research project described by Vieira (1999) which focused on teacher development through collaborative action research and reflective practice. In conclusion she writes that teachers became "involved in a process of autonomization, thus feeling more empowered to take charge of their own course of action" and teaching became "a sort of research, and research [became] a way of teaching." (p. 155). The ways of promoting teacher autonomy and the conditions conducive of teacher autonomy enhancement were investigated by Usma and Frodden (2003). The conclusions they reached through action research indicate that waiting for the ideal conditions for the promotion of autonomy, free of constraints, is unrealistic. What may constitute ideal conditions instead are educational innovation and collaborative work supported by the facilitator.

The role of action research in the development of teacher autonomy was investigated by Gabryś (2000). She found that the student teachers participating in the study considered action research a profitable experience which helped them expand their theoretical knowledge, develop analytical skills, and realize the importance of experimenting and self-development. Additionally, the involvement in action research made them aware of the teacher-learner relationship and brought about changes in teaching. Gabryś concludes that action research helped student teachers develop professional autonomy. Aoki, however, warns against forcing teachers to engage in action research, because, as she writes, "[U]nselectively advocating action research runs the risk of creating another regime." (2003: 144). Further she argues that positivistic action research may undermine teachers' knowledge and thus become another constraint on teacher autonomy.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The study of teacher autonomy in relation to foreign language teaching is not a well-established area of investigation yet. The works on teacher autonomy are less numerous in comparison with those on learner autonomy. It partly may result from the assumption that many theoretical issues concerning learner autonomy apply as well to teachers, partly from the recent shift from teacher-centredness to learner-centredness. This review of selected works on teacher autonomy reveals a diversity in approaches to the problem, but it also unveils an apparent lack of empirical studies which could shed more and/or new light on so far theoretical considerations. Consequently, methodological issues concerning research into teacher autonomy have not been widely discussed yet.

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