

Pedagogy for Autonomy and Educational Success – What Relation? A Multi-disciplinary School Project

Isabel Barbosa

Pedagogy for autonomy – a matter of enthusiasm

The development of learner autonomy has been one of my professional priorities since 1993. If it is true that I had been a “restless” secondary school teacher of English and German for about 18 years, I must admit that getting acquainted with the theory and practice of pedagogy for autonomy (see Barbosa, 2008) didn't make me a more “tranquil” teacher. In fact, broader horizons stimulate the need to go further, and the further you reach, the more you realise how much there is to be explored. In my case, personal and professional growth has been the rewarding result of this process of permanent search.

Trying to implement a pedagogy for autonomy, either as a language teacher or as a teacher educator, means focusing on the Other, which necessarily implies looking at practice in a more (self-) critical way. As you teach how to learn, you learn how to teach, developing your own autonomy while trying to help your students become more autonomous learners and citizens.

In this process, I have learnt that autonomy development is a collaborative endeavour, rather than a matter of independence, and the more I have grown, the more I have needed to share knowledge and experience with others. This has been a source of enormous professional satisfaction, and after 33 years of teaching practice I feel as enthusiastic as at the beginning of my career, because I know that I am still growing, and I am in good company.

Autonomy development – a matter of collaborative commitment

After working as a Foreign Language Teaching Methodology teacher and teacher educator at the University of Minho for 13 years, I returned to my former secondary school as a teacher of English. Although I hadn't lost contact with the school reality, as a supervisor of student teachers in training, I was aware of the new challenges of this change in my professional life. It was the same school, but school wasn't the same as in 1994. Neither was I, and my previous experience in the field of pedagogy for autonomy made me feel the need to give continuity to the work I had been involved in at the university. I started implementing aspects of pedagogy for autonomy with my 10th year students, but knowing that my individual action would bring about very limited results, I designed a collaborative project that might involve other colleagues, from other disciplinary areas.

The project, whose objectives were (i) to promote the integrated development of competences, (ii) to promote practice coherence, with reference to curriculum objectives, and (iii) to promote professional dialogue, was approved by the School Pedagogical Board¹ and became part of the School Annual Plan of Activities. All 10th year teachers were informed about the initiative at the end of the first term, but some teachers of other levels heard about it and came to me asking if they could join the project. So, this made it possible to form a

¹ This Board is formed by the Head of the Executive Board and all Department Coordinators, who approve the Annual Plan of Activities, in accordance with the School Educational Project.

multidisciplinary group of 20 teachers (including 11th and 12th year levels) interested in experimenting what for most of them was a new pedagogical approach.

In January 2008, we started working as a group, and the first meetings were dedicated to the discussion of the concept of autonomy and some forms of operationalising it. I shared some of the materials I had designed for my classes, and some of these were analysed according to parameters of pedagogy for autonomy (Vieira, 2001: 97-100) (see Appendix 1). Some colleagues adopted or adapted some of the examples provided, while others designed their own materials, according to the aspects they decided to focus on.

In the English teaching context, the teachers involved in the project experimented different strategies, aiming at the integrated development of the communicative and learning competences. Although most of the things we did – engaging the learners in systematic *experimentation, reflection, negotiation and regulation* practices – were not extraordinarily innovative, they were new to most students, and are not part of most teachers' practices in our educational context. Therefore, I thought that our project deserved disseminating more widely, and I invited two of my colleagues to make a joint presentation at the annual conference of the Portuguese Association of Teachers of English, which was held in May; in July, a Maths colleague accepted my invitation to present with me at the GT-PA (Working Group-Pedagogy for Autonomy) conference at the University of Minho. A Philosophy colleague couldn't be present, but I represented her, making reference to a paper (Barbosa & Cerqueira, 2008) we had written for "Cadernos 5"¹, which was distributed to all conference participants. We got very positive feedback from colleagues, who saw this project as an extension of GT-PA. However, these colleagues, who came from

other schools, found the project a good idea, but considered it difficult to put into practice, not only because there is no culture of collaboration in our schools, but also because it hasn't been easy for teachers to cope with all the recent changes imposed on them by the Ministry of Education.

At the end of the school year, the project was very positively evaluated by the team members, and all the respondents to the evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix 2) stated their willingness to continue this work, despite the difficulties they had experienced and modest results achieved.

In October we organised a public seminar to inform the whole community about our work. The seminar was open to all the school teachers, students, the representative of the Parents Association, and teachers from all the other secondary schools in Braga. To make this seminar not only informative but also formative, I invited my friend Flávia Vieira to make a presentation on the theme of our project, which she kindly accepted to do. And as students are at the centre of the whole process of autonomy development, we thought we should give voice to some of those directly involved, but only two accepted the challenge to participate. They took it very seriously and appreciated the chance to express their opinions on pedagogical matters in public. Their presence was considered one of the strong points of the seminar, and some of the teachers didn't miss the opportunity to get the students' perspectives on the project. The students' views confirmed our belief that a learner/learning-centred approach is a valuable means to foster their success as learners, mainly if teachers work in a concerted way.

We'll try to repeat the experience, engaging as many students as possible, both as presenters and as participants, because their voices can have a stronger impact on the most sceptical members of the audience.

Pedagogy for autonomy towards educational success – a matter of hope

¹ "Cadernos" is a GT-PA publication, which includes articles, papers and teaching materials authored by members of the group.

We are aware that this project is just the beginning of what may become an important change in our professional life, and in the academic life of our students. As many of these have started realising that they *do* play the most important role in the learning process, we all have become aware that it is up to us to give them this chance.

After the seminar, a few more colleagues became members of the team. This gives us reasons to hope that it is possible to swim against the tide of professional demotivation and dissatisfaction, making it easier to promote learner and teacher autonomy. We have come to understand this as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (Raya et al., 2007: 1).

References

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Isabel lives and works in Braga, Portugal. She began her teaching career in 1975. In 1993 she attended a course on pedagogy for autonomy, and has been interested in this pedagogical approach ever since. She worked as a teacher and teacher educator at the University of Minho for 14 years. Last school year she went back to Sá de Miranda Secondary School, where she now teaches English.

APPENDIX 1

PLANNING AND EVALUATING A LEARNER DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY *GUIDING QUESTIONS*

The following questions aim at helping teachers plan and/ or evaluate a Learner Development Activity (LDA), i.e. any activity that seeks to develop learning competence (willingness and ability to learn = readiness to manage learning). Sections A-C refer to general characteristics of the LDA; Section D focusses on the learners' roles in accomplishing it; Section E is a self-regulation checklist for the teacher who seeks to develop a pedagogy for autonomy.

A. TRANSPARENCY/EXPLICITNESS

- **WHAT** What aspects of the learning competence are involved in the LDA?
- **WHAT FOR** What are the LDA aims/ purposes?
- **WHY** What is the rationale of the LDA?
- **HOW** What tasks increase the learners' willingness and ability to learn?
- How explicit are the answers to the above questions in the learning material? Are there strategies to compensate for lack of explicitness?

B. INTEGRATION

- Is the development of learning competence articulated with the development of communicative competence, i.e. does the LDA comprise both learner training and language training as integrated purposes?
- In case the LDA solely focusses on the learning competence, what strategies are used to increase the learners' perception of the relevance of the activity in terms of language improvement?

C. APPROPRIATENESS TO CONTEXT/MEANINGFULNESS

Does the LDA...

- require a diagnosis of the learners' readiness to accomplish it?
 - Does it respond to the learners' characteristics, interests and needs?
 - Does it build on the learners' previous knowledge and experience?
- provide authentic and useful learning experiences?
- involve competences that can be transferred to other learning situations?
- promote progress in the learners' learning competence?

D. LEARNER ROLES TOWARDS SELF-DIRECTION

LDAs may involve learners in a variety of roles. Each LDA should have a particular focus. The questions below may help you to determine it.

REFLECTION

- **Does the LDA allow the learners to develop language awareness?**
 - Formal properties of language
 - Pragmatic properties of language
 - Sociocultural aspects
- **Does the LDA allow the learners to develop learning awareness?**
 - Sense of agency (self-control, self-esteem, self-confidence)
 - Attitudes, representations, beliefs
 - Preferences and styles
 - Aims and priorities
 - Strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, strategic, socio-affective)
 - Tasks (focus, purpose, rationale, demands)
 - Instructional/ didactic process (objectives, activities, materials, evaluation, roles, ...)

EXPERIMENTATION

- **Does the LDA allow the learners to experience learning strategies?**
 - Discover and try out learning strategies in class
 - Use learning strategies outside class
 - Explore (pedagogical/ non-pedagogical) resource materials

REGULATION

- **Does the LDA allow the learners to regulate learning experiences?**
 - Monitor/ evaluate attitudes, representations, beliefs
 - Monitor/ evaluate strategic knowledge and ability
 - Assess learning outcomes and progress
 - Identify learning problems or needs
 - Set learning goals
 - Plan their learning
 - Evaluate the instructional/ didactic process

NEGOTIATION

> Does the LDA allow the learners to co-construct learning experiences?

- Work in collaboration with peers
- Work in collaboration with the teacher
- Take the initiative, choose and decide

E. TEACHER ROLES TOWARDS LEARNER SELF-DIRECTION

The following questions may help teachers become more aware of their readiness and roles in developing a pedagogy for autonomy. Although the ideal answer to the questions is YES, no teacher is an ideal teacher. In this sense, the checklist should be understood as a self-development instrument rather than an assessment tool. You may select or add questions which are more appropriate/ relevant in your own professional situation.

AM I WILLING TO...? AM I ABLE TO...?

- Understand what is involved in language education and its role in school curricula
- Understand the theory and practice of a pedagogy for autonomy (assumptions and principles; methodological approaches; research studies)
- See teaching as an inquiry-oriented, exploratory profession as situations are often unique, uncertain and problematic
- Challenge routines, conventions and traditions (be subversive if necessary)
- Share my personal theories and practices with peers
- Encourage the learners to be critical towards social and educational values and practices, and involve them in finding common solutions which seem appropriate (though not necessarily ideal)
- Share responsibilities and decisions with the learners
- Share my pedagogical beliefs with the learners
- Accept the fact that the learners may not share my own expectations, opinions or beliefs, and that it is not always easy or even desirable to reach a single conclusion or point of view
- Articulate the personal dimensions of learning (individual expectations, needs and interests) with the social/ interactive nature of the classroom culture
- Foster interaction where everyone has the right to speak and to contribute towards the co-construction of meanings
- Collect learner data so as to understand learning processes and their evolution (eg. through observation, questionnaires, diaries, interviews, checklists, etc.)
- Analyse learner data to find relevant cues to improve teaching and learning
- Find ways to take learning competence into account when assessing the learners (eg. through self-assessment)

APPENDIX 2



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Pedagogy for autonomy and educational success – what relation?

Questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is to collect data that may enable us to make a global evaluation of the work done within our project. Please give a sincere answer to all the questions.

A. What motivated you to join this project?

B. To what extent have you got involved in the work done so far? Choose (X) the statements that best correspond to your personal case:

1. Team meetings

Took part in all the meetings.

Took part in some meetings.

Took part in only one of the meetings.

Didn't take part in any meetings, but kept informed about what was discussed there.

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>

2. **Pedagogical intervention**

Designed didactic materials focused on the learning process.

Adopted/adapted materials used by colleagues.

Implemented strategies/activities focused on the learning process

If you have chosen any of these statements, please give examples of the main focus of the work done with the learners.

3. **Peer-collaboration**

Shared materials/experiences with team members

Shared ideas with colleagues about pedagogical issues, within the project.

Other forms of collaboration:

C. In a scale from 1 to 5, indicate your degree of satisfaction about the project. Justify your answer briefly.

1 – very dissatisfied

2

3

4

5 – very satisfied

D. Name what you consider to have been the positive and negative aspects of the project.

Positive aspects:

Negative aspects:

E. Would you like to give continuity to this work in the coming year?

YES

NO

What do you suggest, in order to better meet the project objectives?

Thank you for your collaboration! Isabel Barbosa

Answers to the questionnaire

(N=16)

A. Reasons for joining the project

- ♦ improve practice / increase knowledge about pedagogy for autonomy
- ♦ share/confront practices
- ♦ need for collaborative work
- ♦ reflect on pedagogic issues
- ♦ Improve learners' active involvement
- ♦ curiosity/ interest in new approaches and innovative strategies
- ♦ participate actively in a relevant and useful school project

B. Personal involvement

1. Meetings

- ♦ took part in (almost) all the meetings (8)
- ♦ took part in some meetings (7)
- ♦ took part in one meeting (1)
- ♦ didn't go to any meeting but kept informed about the work done (0)

2. Pedagogical intervention

- ♦ Designed learner development materials (3)

- ♦ Adopted/adapted materials used by colleagues (12)

Implemented learner development activities/ strategies (8)

3. Peer-collaboration

Shared materials/experiences with team colleagues (7)

Exchanged ideas with colleagues about pedagogic issues (12)

C. Degree of satisfaction

1—very dissatisfied (0)

2—dissatisfied (1)

3—neutral (3)

4—satisfied (6)

5—very satisfied (4)

N.B. One response was halfway between *satisfied* and *very satisfied*; one response was blank.

Justifications (positive)

- ♦ "this project 'made me' stop to think and change attitudes"
- ♦ enriching project
- ♦ fill in 'theory gaps'

- ◆ sharing of concerns, experiments and materials
- ◆ personal growth
 - ◆ opportunity for critical reflection (on teaching and learning practices)

Justifications (negative)

- ◆ difficulties to meet
- ◆ unclear understanding of objectives
- ◆ irregular participation of team members
- ◆ low personal involvement

D. Evaluation

Positive aspects

- ◆ sense of 'not being alone'
- ◆ team work
- ◆ informal working atmosphere/ good interpersonal relationship
- ◆ sharing of pedagogic experiments, ideas, materials
- ◆ meeting colleagues from different disciplinary areas
- ◆ theoretical support
- ◆ 'waking up' for innovative approaches/ need to innovate
- ◆ project coordinator's role (enthusiasm, availability, sensitiveness, commitment, competence, patience)

Negative aspects

- ◆ late start
- ◆ lack of time for meetings
- ◆ meetings after classes (low motivation and productivity)
- ◆ unclear understanding of objectives
- ◆ "liredness"
- ◆ time management

E. Willingness to continue Yes: 16 No: 0

F. Suggestions

- ◆ start activities at the beginning of school year
- ◆ early action planning
- ◆ clearer definition of objectives
- ◆ definition of common goals
- ◆ inclusion of the project in the teachers' timetable
- ◆ better coordination among team members
- ◆ more time for the project
- ◆ inclusion of more teachers from other disciplinary areas
- ◆ more sharing of materials
- ◆ more motivation and commitment on the part of team members
- ◆ more materials production

"It's all about logbooks": A Paradigm for Language Teaching, with Logbooks as the Essential Ingredient

Frank Lacey

I have been working as a secondary school language teacher for over 20 years now, most of the time based in Denmark. Over the past few years I have, under the supervision of Leni Dam, seen the wisdom of autonomy. In a previous article (Lacey, 2007), I proposed a dogma of autonomy. This was an attempt to define autonomy as more than a humanistic approach to language teaching and had as its main elements:

- Autonomy means moving the focus from teaching to learning.

- Autonomy affords maximum possible influence to the learners.
- Autonomy encourages and needs peer support and cooperation.
- Autonomy means making use of self/peer assessment.
- Autonomy requires and ensures 100% differentiation.
- Autonomy can only be practiced with student logbooks which are a documentation of learning and a tool of reflection.