

Unveiling teacher and learner beliefs: an interview with Turid Trebbi

Turid Trebbi and Andy Barfield

Introduction

Turid Trebbi works at the University of Bergen in Norway and has been for two decades one of the co-coordinators (together with Leni Dam, Gerd Gabrielsen, Rigmor Eriksson and Viljo Kohonen) of the Nordic Workshops on Developing



Autonomous Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom. The Third Nordic Workshop took place in Bergen in 1989. It saw the production of the Bergen definition of learner

autonomy (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander & Trebbi, 1990: 'Towards a definition of autonomy') that was published in the Proceedings (Trebbi, 1990). Among Turid's more recent projects has been her involvement in EuroPAL, a European Commission-supported project aimed at "providing modern language teachers and teachers-to-be with a broad and balanced knowledge and understanding of a pedagogy for autonomy and lifelong learning in a school context" (<http://www.euro-pal.net/>).

In this interview, conducted over email in late 2008 and early 2009, Turid Trebbi explains some of the primary areas of focus in the approach to teacher education for a pedagogy for learner autonomy that she and her colleagues have been collaboratively developing with their student teachers at the University of Bergen.

Andy: Turid, many thanks for doing this interview for *Independence*. By way of starting, could I ask you to say a little bit about your work on autonomy in language education?

Turid: Sure. Let me first present the context I am working in.

Context: language teacher education

I teach didactics of foreign languages in language teacher education at the University of Bergen with a special focus on French as a foreign language in lower (13-16-? years) and upper (16-19 years) secondary education in Norway. This means that I do not teach languages. I exclusively deal with questions related to how languages may be learned and taught.

The University of Bergen offers two different models of teacher education: a one-year postgraduate degree of pedagogy, didactics of two disciplines and practice, and a new five-year master's degree with integration of discipline modules, pedagogy, didactics and practice. What follows is based on the one-year degree as we don't yet have sufficient experiences from the new model.

The one-year postgraduate degree covers 96 hours of pedagogy, 48 hours of didactics in each of two disciplines and 120 hours of school practice. Theory (T) and practice (P) periods alternate in the following way during each of the two semesters: T1: 5 weeks, P1: 2 weeks, T2: 1 week, P2: 5/6 weeks, T3: 3 weeks.

Learner autonomy in language teacher education

Both the content and learning approaches

of the 48-hour course I am doing are oriented towards student learner autonomy in school and in teacher education.

The content covers the rationale of language learner autonomy and self-directed language learning according to Holec (1979), Little (1991) and the Bergen definition (Trebbi, 1990), and questions related to *why* and *how* learner autonomy is implemented in different school contexts (among others, Dam, 1995; Dam & Thomsen, 1995/2002; Eriksson & Miliander, 1991; Gjørven & Trebbi, 1997; Trebbi, 1995; Trebbi, 2008). This is learning *about* learner autonomy.

We also try to put learner autonomy into practice in the degree programme itself by learning *through* learner autonomy and *in* a learner autonomy-learning environment. The reason for this is not that I see student teachers' own experience of learner autonomy while in teacher education as an absolute prerequisite for developing learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom. We know that pioneers in the 1970s and 1980s did not have an experience-based, but rather a cognitive-based approach to learner autonomy. The main reason for adopting learner autonomy as an approach in my course of didactics is rather to overcome the gap between theory and practice that most of my students encounter while in practice due to the dominance of conventional teaching.

Observations seem to confirm that experiencing learner autonomy during teacher education supports student teachers' insight in, and understanding of, this radical other way of language learning. Hopefully this will help student teachers becoming more comfortable in developing an alternative teaching practice. The assumption is also that taking a learner autonomy approach is beneficial in promoting students' critical thinking in general.

Key features of the one-year programme are:

- student teachers' active approaches

- student teachers' cooperation in setting up the course programme within the official framework for language teacher education
- a small-scale research project during the practice period which is submitted for the final exam
- student teachers' contributions in virtual learning spaces (publications of diaries, analysis of classroom activities, virtual role plays focusing learner and teacher roles, meta-cognition related to students' representations about language learning and teaching)
- meta-perspective on my teaching, the learning environment and the student teachers' approaches to the learning of didactics, all taken as relevant input for developing students' own teaching practice in the foreign language classroom.

Andy: What have you found to be particularly important in understanding how to help teachers develop their practices in the direction of learner autonomy?

Turid: Andy, I interpret your question in two ways:

(a) what I have found to be important for me in order to understand how to help etc, and

(b) what I have found to be important concerning how to help etc.

Let me explain a little more about each of these areas. In relation to (a), what I have found to be particularly important in *understanding* etc. is to explore external and internal constraints that teachers are living with. An important meeting point where we as teacher educators become aware of such constraints are the school visits related to the evaluation of the students' practice.

Andy: Could you take us through some of the major constraints that you see teachers living with in trying to engage with a pedagogy for autonomy?

Turid: Among what we call *external* constraints, teachers report that learner autonomy goes against the dominating

school culture. Colleagues, headmasters, parents and even students expect teachers to adapt to syllabi that are decided on locally, i.e. follow a predefined teaching progression by using a textbook from page to page, join the prevalent type of assessment and testing (for instance, vocabulary tests), and use work planning schemes that are collectively set up by a majority of colleagues. Teachers also point to big classes, lack of time, lack of resources and lack of support to promote innovation. Major *internal* constraints are related to beliefs about students and language learning, views of languages as such, and lack of self-confidence as a professional language teacher.

Andy: During these visits to the student teachers' schools, observation and evaluation are a big part of the work that the teacher educator does?

Turid: It is a very important part of the work, also because the supervisors take part in the extensive conversation led by the teacher trainer after having observed the student. However, it is rather expensive, and during the last years only one visit per student per subject has taken place in each of the two semesters.

Andy: On the surface, at least, it sounds similar to a 'conventional' teacher trainer-teacher trainee practicum event. Directing these conversations, exploring internal and external constraints like the ones that you mentioned above is, I imagine, a central process. If so, how do you see that part of your teacher educator praxis? Can you share some (critical?) episodes here from your experience?

Turid: These conversations are delicate because they have a double function: they are both evaluation and counseling. Obviously, it is not a straightforward thing to promote critical thinking and innovation under such circumstances. On one hand, the trainee often feels obliged to follow the same teaching approach as the supervisor so that evaluating the student also means evaluating the supervisor. On the other hand, there is a risk that the supervisor sees

the critical analysis and evaluation of the student's practice as an attack and starts to defend the trainee.

In my experience, it is fruitful to ask about critical issues, episodes and utterances that the three of us have observed, and then discuss possible interpretations without drawing any conclusions. Pointing at different views may open up a space for more fundamental questions and when there is mutual confidence, new ways of thinking emerge.

An example of a typical starting point may be pupils who complain that the French is a difficult language. What do such utterances mean? How can we understand these statements that we so often hear in the French language classroom? Among different possible interpretations we may assume that:

- this is a student representation about the nature of languages and language learning;
- it is not the language itself that is difficult but the access to the learning of the language;
- the students are afraid to fail; they are not self-confident as language learners;
- the students do not experience the use of the language;
- the students are not involved in their own learning;
- the students are not motivated;
- the students do not know how to go about learning the language.

Then the conversation moves towards questions like *Is there something that the teacher can do about this?* At this point I often introduce principles and activities that emerge from the theory of learner autonomy: awareness raising, learning to learn activities such as guessing strategies, experimentation, self-evaluation, the use of authentic learning material, grammar studies, opening up for differentiated learning approaches. The principles and activities are seen in relation to the conditions in which teachers are working.

I am not sure that this kind of conversation leads to any change.

Although teachers more often than not agree with the alternative way of viewing language teaching and learning, they also think that the alternative is too idealistic. Nevertheless, many supervisors appreciate and want to know more, taking constraints into consideration. This is how networking may start. Teachers themselves take the initiative to learn more and exchange experience and ideas through becoming part of a network.

Andy: How do these networks function? What elements (actors, activities, resources etc) help make a pro-autonomy network successful in your experience?

Turid: To answer this question, I have to go back in time because I do not have recent experiences of supporting or participating in networking myself. In my experience, self-driven networks are the most efficient. They are driven by teachers who are determined to experiment in order to change their teaching practice and are aware of the risk of failure that is often witnessed by negative colleagues. In such networks, teachers meet regularly, tell about their experiments, try to analyse both failure and success, and make reports to come back to later in the process. They share ideas and plan new initiatives that they put into practice respectively and report back to the group. Networking may often need support from teacher educators. The need for financial support for teachers' extra workload should not be underestimated. Reading guides also prove to be important. An interesting network experience has recently been reported by Rita Gjørven (Gjørven, 2008).

Andy: Please tell me a little more about Rita Gjørven's work...

Turid: A group of 10 former students wanted to implement learner autonomy in their classes but found it difficult due to the prevalent school culture. They decided to meet on a regular basis and invited their former teacher, Rita Gjørven, to support them. She made it into a research project and found that networking was crucial for the members of the group in order to stand

up against colleagues' expectations and to practice the way they believed in.

Andy: And coming back to (b) - what you have found to be important in how to help teachers develop their practices in the direction of learner autonomy...

Turid: There are, in my opinion, three features of particular importance:

- consciousness raising (about context sensitive constraints and teachers' space of manoeuvre)
- operationalization of LA (through examples of self-directed learning put into practice)
- precise theoretical concepts (that can illuminate culturally and individually diverse approaches to developing LA).

In fact, to a large extent, my work is based on different types of *confrontation*. Let me explain this further: the critical issue in initial teacher education (and also in in-service education which I am not dealing with here) is the participants' beliefs about languages and language learning and teaching. We know that teaching approaches are closely linked to one's beliefs. In order to make changes of practice possible, I have therefore been concerned with the question of how beliefs can be unveiled and modified.

Andy: Please explain further...

Turid: In the first theory period of the programme (T1), the students' personal experiences about language learning are confronted with national curricula from a socio-cultural and historic perspective, and with learner autonomy and self-direction as an answer to the issue of differentiation and adapted teaching which are crucial in Norwegian educational policy.

We refer to the national curriculum (LK06) for secondary education where 'language learning' is one of three main study areas. This area covers insights into one's own language learning and language use. To define one's own learning needs, make decisions about learning objectives, tools and methods and to self-assess the working progress and acquired knowledge are all recommended for successful

language learning in the national secondary education guidelines of LK06. Reading literature dealing with different socio-constructivist, socio-cultural and language learning theories is a substantial part of the first theory period.

In the first practice part of the programme (P1), the process of observation is at the centre of attention. As we observe mostly what we recognise, we seldom become aware of features that we have not thought of before. Trying to develop a more critical observation in order to shed light on what is going on in the foreign language classroom, we orient the observation towards moments of surprise, pleasure, irritation, annoyance, and phenomena that are difficult to understand. These are reported in virtual publications in the students' personal space and are accessible to the whole group for commenting and questioning. This is virtual networking, based on the idea of distributed learning with the group collective. Reading becomes even more important at this stage when trying to interpret and understand observations from practice.

In the second theory period (T2), we work more specifically on beliefs or representations that we live with in the foreign language classroom. Together with a former doctoral student (Myriam Coco), I have developed a virtual role-play where the students play the role of a teacher or a student using an avatar, i.e. a play figure. The students speak through the mask of the avatar. We know what the avatar says, but not what the students think. The students enjoy the play and excel in co-producing astonishing dialogues. In the post-play phase we interpret the computer-compiled text by using a type of discourse analysis to collect representations in the text; here we discuss possible meanings of avatar behavior and possible impacts on classroom practice. The activity is stimulating and, because we don't know who is 'the owner' of the different representations, the students do not feel

threatened (Coco, 2006; Trebbi, Coco & Jopp, 2003).

In P2 the students are invited to keep a diary and publish in the virtual space. Critical issues are elicited and discussed in an a-synchronic virtual forum. The students develop a digital portfolio collecting data and material for the mini-research project.

In T3 the students elaborate the project report to be submitted for an oral or written exam. In this process the teacher educator acts as counselor.

These are some key features of my work on learner autonomy in language teacher education.

Andy: Turid, looking at your work as a whole, at this point how would you encapsulate your position?

Turid: Learner autonomy is a didactic approach to language learning which implies a radical rupture with conventional language teaching practice by the way it alters the self-conception of both the teacher and the learner and opens for new relationships between the actors. I am aware of the fact that conventional practice relies on centuries of experience and views of teaching and learning. We cannot expect 40 years of learner autonomy to change 400 years of tradition. It takes longer. In the meantime, short steps make a change, and we are able to act in accordance with what we believe is the most, if not the only, efficient approach in the foreign language classroom.

Andy: Many many thanks, Turid, for sharing your work and insights with us.

References

- Coco, M. (2006). Campus numérique et représentations des futurs enseignants de langues étrangères. *Distances et Savoirs*, 4/2006. *Campus numériques* 2, 397-431.
- Dam, L. (1995). *Learner Autonomy 3: From theory to practice*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Dam, L. & Thomsen, H. (1995/2002). *Undervisningsdifferensiering i*

- fremmedspråk. Hvad? Hvorfor? Hvordan?* København: Malling Beck.
- Eriksson, R. & Miliander, J. (1991). Lärarstyrd elevplanerad engelska (rapport - arbetsrapport). In *Skolöverstyrelsen F 91:1*. Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen.
- Gjørven, R & Trebbi, T. (1997). Apprendre à apprendre une langue en contexte institutionnel: deux exemples norvégiens. In H. Holec & I. Huttunen (eds), *L'autonomie de l'apprenant en langues vivantes (191-207)*. Strasbourg: Conseil de l'Europe.
- Gjørven, R. (2008). *Fra fransklærerstudent til fransklærer* (From student teacher to teacher of French). I *Fokus på språk 12/2008* Oslo: Fremmedspråksenteret.
- Holec, H. (1979). *Autonomie et apprentissage des langues étrangères*. Strasbourg: Hatier.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- LK06. (2006). Læreplan i fremmedspråk (Subject Curriculum for foreign languages). In *Kunnskapsløftet (Curriculum for knowledge promotion)*. Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education. Available at: www.utdanningsdirektoratet.no/
- Trebbi, T. (2008). Freedom - a prerequisite for learner autonomy? Classroom innovation and language teacher education. In T. Lamb & H. Reinders (eds), *Learner and Teacher Autonomy: Concepts, realities and responses* (33-46). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Trebbi, T., Coco, M. & Jopp, C. (2003). Didaktisk rollespill i en MOO: Er læringen satt på spill? På jakt etter "the missing link" mellom praksis og teori. INVITIS-prosjektet. Paper presented at the Network for IT Research and Competence in Education (ITU) Conference 17-19 October 2003, Norway: Oslo. Available at: www.itu.no/filearchive/fil_Turid_Trebbi.doc
- Trebbi, T. (1995). Apprentissage auto-dirigé et enseignement secondaire: un centre de ressources au collège. *Mélanges 22/95. Spécial Centre de Ressources. Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues* (169-193). Nancy: C.R.A.P.E.L. Available at: http://revues.univ-nancy2.fr/melangesCrapel/article_melange.php?id_article=78
- Trebbi, T. (ed.) (1990). *Developing Autonomous Learning in the FL Classroom. Bergen, August 11-14 1989. Report*. Bergen: Institutt for praktisk pedagogikk, Universitetet i Bergen. Available at: http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/dahla/archive/trebbi_1990

☞ Lifeline for a deadline

Friday 30th October

Early bird registration for SWON2009

Autonomy in a Connected World

See pages 49-52 for more details