experience. This led me to wonder why they managed to regulate themselves better, why they seek solutions on their own when encountered problems, and why they were able to tell me more about their learning in the diaries. In this online course, with only three face-to-face meetings, the learning outcome depended greatly on the students themselves and how much responsibility they were willing to assume. Therefore, I decided to research the critical role learner autonomy plays in a technology-mediated learning environment in my PhD study.

To avoid imposing my own perception of autonomy onto my students, I replied on diaries and reflective accounts as means to gain better understandings of their actual development of learner autonomy. Based on this understanding, I could later develop a more systematic way to foster students’ subsequent development of learner autonomy. I am now still at the messy stage of analysing data and piecing together the puzzles. Hopefully, I will soon share with you results of my findings.

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Teacher autonomy: a qualitative research study with student teachers

Cem Balcikanli

Give a man a fish,
Feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish,
Feed him for a lifetime.

Introduction

When I first heard this proverb, I could hardly make a connection between the concept of learner autonomy and what its ongoing development might involve in practice. Yet, as I got trained to be a teacher and came into contact with learner autonomy, academically and personally, I came to realize that, in order to become a successful learner and teacher, you have to display autonomous skills as a language learner and teacher. Yes, autonomy is in every single phase of education. In this short article, I’ll seek to relate teacher-learner autonomy, simply defined as “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others” (Smith, 2003: 1) to a qualitative research study that I carried out with a group of student teachers.

I really relish the process which each and every student teacher has to go through as they are trained to be teachers, for it looks like a striking transition “from a caterpillar to a butterfly” (Enyedi, 2007). Indeed, I cannot help myself thinking about whether they will experience this transition as an autonomous teacher or not. If the answer is ‘Yes’, how will they achieve that? My focus on teacher autonomy from student teachers’ perspectives stems from the belief that “language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous” (Little, 1995: 180). For me, this means that student teachers need to be encouraged to display autonomous skills in their initial teacher training, so they will be able to take a positive stance towards the development of learner autonomy in their own future teaching. Little (1995), Tort-Moloney (1997), McGrath (2000), Smith (2000), Aoki and Hamakawa (2003), Huang (2005), Vieira (2007), Smith and Erdoğan (2008) and Burkert and
Schwienhorst (2008) all take the view that teachers who themselves are autonomous learners may have a positive influence on the development of autonomy in their students. Similarly, Leni Dam (2007), in her introductory article in Independence about teacher education for learner autonomy, raises the importance of learner autonomy in initial teacher training by putting the following quote at the very beginning of her article “... teachers will hardly be prepared or able to administer autonomous learning processes in their students if their own learning is not geared to the same principles.” (Edelhoff, 1984: 189, cited in Dam, 2007: 1) Therefore, if our aim is to lead our student teachers to become autonomous teachers, isn’t it definitely worth a try to understand their perspectives on teacher autonomy when they are being trained to be teachers?

**On the way**

Without doubt, it is worth trying to learn the way these caterpillars-to-be-butterflies perceive the term ‘teacher autonomy’. Nonetheless, although I was interested in finding out more about this issue, I had a problem to get around. How was I going to do that? As far as autonomy is concerned, I tend to refrain from employing quantitative tools mainly because we cannot directly observe the students or teachers’ level or state of acting autonomously. I also knew from experience that the student teachers I worked with would be willing to tell their stories, so I did not want to limit their creativity to some closed-ended survey questions. Instead, I got motivated by considering different definitions of teacher autonomy (Barfield et al., 2001; Aoki, 2002; Smith, 2003; Huang, 2005). After spending a considerable amount of time on different definitions of the concept, I came up with six questions that might assist me in collecting student teachers’ perspectives on teacher autonomy. Those questions are:

- How do you define a successful teacher?
- What are the characteristics of a responsible teacher?
- What do you understand from the term ‘teacher autonomy’?
- Is it important to have teacher autonomy? Why?
- What should a teacher do to promote her/his own autonomy?
- How do you interpret your own teaching in terms of autonomy?

The next thing I did was to set off to explore the way student teachers perceive the term ‘teacher autonomy’. I could easily find a large number of student teachers (over 100) since I work as a research assistant in a large English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at Gazi University in Turkey. I had an appointment with them in groups of 10 students in my office at different times. I used a voice recorder while interviewing them and I deliberately avoided taking notes so as not to disturb them. I interviewed each group for around 45 minutes, which took a lot more energy and time than I anticipated it would; yet, I did not complain as I was becoming more and more curious about the views that the student teachers started sharing with me.

**Sort of data**

Following the interviews, I coded the data and grouped similar responses into categories. Concerning the question *How do you define a successful teacher?*, the student teachers’ responses concentrated on three basic dimensions, namely, subject knowledge, teaching knowledge, and intellectual knowledge. They mentioned other important factors as well, as illustrated in the following direct quotations from the interviews:

* ... is always open to change*
* ... is the one who knows what, when and how to do when s/he is teaching*
* ... is the teacher who manages to reach his/her goals*
* ... should involve students in the learning process (learner-centeredness)*
...is aware of him/herself as a teacher. These comments seem to construct successful teaching as an ability to plan and take action in collaboration with learners, within one’s awareness of oneself as a teacher, by being flexible towards others and others’ involvement in a non-dogmatic way. What is interesting here is that the comments indicate that student teachers believe that there are other dimensions to ‘successful teacher’ than the three dimensions of skills, knowledge and attitude mentioned in Smith’s definition of teacher-learner autonomy.

In responding to the question What are the characteristics of a responsible teacher?, the following views were fairly representative:

...is creative, open to development, ready to take risks, willing to search, planned
...is aware of what is happening around
...has self-esteem and self-confidence, good time-management skills
...has the ability to self-criticize, to self-regulate, to make decisions regarding his/her own teaching, problem-solving skills.

There is some overlap with the first set of comments like openness/planning. Along with this, the student teachers indicated that teacher responsibility involves for them more particular skills, confident self-awareness and a creative perspective-taking.

The interviewees gave a greater variety of views in response to What do you understand by the term ‘teacher autonomy?’:

... the awareness of his/her own strength/weaknesses
...the capacity to develop certain skills for oneself as a teacher, the tendency to criticize oneself
...self-development, self-observation, self-awareness of his/her own teaching, continuous reflection, sustainable development, self-control
...taking responsibility for his/her own learners, being open to change through

...co-operation with others, questioning oneself in particular positions
... the responsibility to make choices regarding his/her own teaching.

Their comments suggest that self-awareness, self-development, self-control, co-operation, and criticism seem to be cognitive and social dimensions that have already been internalised in their initial conceptualizations of teacher autonomy. In addition to this, they view ‘taking responsibility for his/her own learners’ and ‘questioning oneself in particular positions’ as related to teacher autonomy. That is, they have a developing awareness of teacher autonomy for their future practices.

In response to the question Is it important to have teacher autonomy? Why?, the student teachers had the following opinions:

...one should criticize and evaluate oneself
...teacher autonomy is essential for successful language learning/teaching
...it is necessary because it leads teachers to catch up with the innovations
...I think the lack of teacher autonomy causes some problems
...one cannot become a successful teacher unless s/he knows how, what and why to do

...it is important because one who doesn’t know oneself fails to know others.

As one can easily recognize in all of these comments, teacher autonomy, in their remarks, is of great importance, especially in connection with the ability to catch up with the recent innovations and with having a critical self-awareness of oneself as a teacher. Also, these teachers-to-be believe that teacher autonomy is a requisite for successful teacher education.

Regarding the question What should a teacher do to promote her/his own autonomy?, the student teachers came up with various suggestions/ideas:

... should read a lot to be familiar with current subjects
... should cooperate with others
...it is really necessary to be open to criticism
...may take notes at the end of each lesson, then s/he evaluates them
...video-taping themselves would be beneficial
...self-observation forms may be supplied to the teachers
...teachers should observe each other to give feedback (peer-observation).

Their general view was that teachers have to do something to promote autonomous skills. Co-operating with others, accepting criticism, video-taping classes and doing self-observation are among the activities that they consider important. Above all, teachers should be able to observe each other in order to provide feedback to each other; thus, teacher autonomy is understood as a collaborative process, as Smith’s definition points out, and one which needs specific tools to sustain and transform it.

Responses to the question How do you interpret your own teaching in terms of autonomy? revealed the following views:
...I believe that it is a continuous process, but I am at the very beginning of teaching
...I strongly believe that teacher’s own autonomy is a life-long process, so I cannot say I am totally an autonomous teacher
...I need an atmosphere in which I can feel more autonomous in my teaching
...I can say that I am using internet to catch up with the latest innovations
...today, I taught English for the first time, which was perfect; even though I made lots of mistakes, nobody realized it except for me, I think autonomy is important at this point
...I am aware of my weaknesses, I think I will overcome them once I start to teach in real classrooms.

It occurs to me that student teachers, who generally do not regard themselves as teachers yet, have quite strong claims about their own autonomous skills for their future identities as teachers. They seem to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and consider the development of a teacher’s own autonomy as a life-long process. In this way, they relate the development of their sense of teacher autonomy to the importance of working in an environment that will encourage them to do this. In other words, teacher autonomy is projected as an important professional process that they need to engage with, but is also understood as subject to external constraints and affordances.

Concluding thoughts
These student teachers, on the whole, feel that teacher autonomy is an essential aspect of successful language teacher education in a way that it enables teachers to conduct their own teaching more effectively, become more aware of what and why of teaching processes, and follow new trends in language teaching/learning.

Looking at the characteristics of successful language teachers and those of autonomous teachers, one can easily see from the student teachers’ responses that there are overlapping features, including awareness of their own teaching, creativity, and problem-solving skills. This suggests that teacher autonomy should be emphasized in initial training, not just in in-service training as it usually is. Student teachers seem to have various working concepts of teacher autonomy; these range from self-development, self-observation, self-awareness of his own teaching to continuous reflection, sustainable development, and self-control. This indicates that they already have a well-developed idea of what teacher autonomy may involve for them in the future.

Yet, it seems that student teachers are not aware of their own teaching skills, possibly due to the fact that they have not experienced real teaching yet. In turn, this leads me to suggest four fundamental routes to assisting the ongoing development of teacher autonomy:
(1) Student teachers must be given room to develop their own autonomy in their own initial teacher training. As Little (1995: 180) suggests, “first-hand experience” for student teachers in their own early teacher education facilitates their adoption of learner autonomy principles in their future teaching practices.

(2) Teacher autonomy should be emphasized in initial training, as well as in-service training, through a focus on teacher reflection and taking responsibility for one’s own learning/teaching processes.

(3) In order to help teachers develop their own autonomy, using portfolios should be required in initial teacher training. Portfolios are themselves the gradual outcome of a materials and teacher-encouraged process of cultivating and exploiting teacher autonomy in many respects, which is why they can enable student teachers to keep track of their own progress.

(4) Teacher logs are also a very important means of raising teachers’ autonomy, as such logs provide them with a concrete record to observe themselves, become aware of what they have or have not acquired, and explore their own thinking and assumptions.

One dilemma still remains unexplored here: Will these butterflies later keep believing in the importance of teacher-learner autonomy and developing it for themselves in collaboration with others? We want it to be so, because hungry butterflies need to satisfy their appetites, with different types of food, including the unbearable lightness of teaching for real. Their hunger is always there, even if it is sometimes suppressed, but will they find the appropriate sustenance?

References


**Ethical challenges in internet-based research on language learners’ autonomous learning: personal reflections**

**Xuesong Gao**

I have been always interested in knowing more about learners who learn English beyond the confines of classrooms. According to my experience, these learners exist in large numbers on the Chinese mainland. It is also my belief that their language learning experiences will be of interest to both researchers and teachers who wish to promote autonomous learning among language learners. For instance, it may interest teachers to know how these learners sustain their autonomous learning efforts and what kind of beliefs they have in the learning process. Since they do not sit in our classrooms, such research presents enormous challenges as these learners are often difficult to access. Even if we can have face-to-face interviews with them, they may refrain from sayings things...