

Teacher-Learner Autonomy in Second Language Acquisition

AUTONOMIE D'ENSEIGNANT ET D'APPRENANT DANS L'ACQUISITION D'UNE DEUXIÈME LANGUE

YAN Hui¹

Abstract: This Paper intends to discuss teacher autonomy as well as learner autonomy, thus giving some insights into the study and application of learning autonomy in second language Acquisition(SLA).

Key words: teacher autonomy; learner autonomy; interactions

Résumé: Cet article compte discuter de l'autonomie des enseignants et l'autonomie des apprenants, ce qui donne un certain éclairage sur l'étude et l'application de l'autonomie d'études dans l'acquisition d'une deuxième langue (SLA).

Mots-Clés: autonomie d'enseignant, autonomie d'apprenant, interactions

1. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy have been introduced and widely discussed as the learning responsibility of learners has been paid more attention to so as to improve the learning autonomy in SLA. Therefore, a comprehensive discussion of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy is of utmost importance to foster a better understanding and application of learning autonomy.

2. LEARNING AUTONOMY

The interactions between teachers and learners are inevitable and critically important in second language acquisition. Thus, both teachers and learners need to understand teacher autonomy and learner autonomy so as to adapt themselves to the classroom learning autonomy.

¹ 1971-, female, MA. English lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, Shandong China 266061. Areas of academic interests: Second Language Acquisition

* Received 16 November 2009; accepted 20 January, 2010

2.1 Teacher Autonomy

The term teacher autonomy is first defined by Little(1995:176) as the “teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching.” After that, scholars have been trying to define teacher autonomy from different aspects. Aoki’s (2000:19) offers an explicit definition of teacher autonomy, suggesting that this involves ‘the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own teaching”. According to Richard Smith(2000:89), teacher autonomy refers to “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others.” Benson (2000:111) argues that teacher autonomy can be seen as “a right to freedom from control (or an ability to exercise this right) as well as actual freedom from control”.

In short, these definitions all agree on that teacher autonomy is a kind of capacity or ability. The author also believes that teacher autonomy is a capacity of teachers. But, since the ability of these learners may influence the teacher’s capacity, the author advocates that teacher autonomy means the capacity of teachers in managing knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the students’ acquisition of a language with regard to learners.

Other scholars study teacher autonomy by analyzing its characteristics. Smith (2001:5) offers a very comprehensive set of six characteristics of teacher autonomy as follows:

- A. Self-directed professional action
- B. Capacity for self-directed professional action
- C. Freedom from control over professional action
- D. Self-directed professional development
- E. Capacity for self-directed professional development
- F. Freedom from control over professional development

This summary has analyzed almost every aspect of teacher autonomy. However, it fails to pay due attention to an important element in teacher autonomy, that is teachers’ attitudes. The subjective element as teachers’ attitudes determines the adoption and successful application of teacher autonomy. Therefore, the author divides teacher autonomy from three dimensions that is the capacity and freedom in knowledge, skills and attitudes. Favorable attitudes towards teacher autonomy are indispensable to the practice of teacher autonomy. Negative attitudes of teachers, hinders the process. Guided by the conventional idea that teachers are responsible for students learning, some English teachers in China can hardly trust their learners to shoulder their own learning responsibility, thus employing no freedom from managing the entire learning process.

2.2 Learner Autonomy

Holec (1981: 3) first defines learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one's learning”. He also maintains that learner autonomy grows out of the individual learner's acceptance of responsibility for his or her own learning. Afterwards, scholars have been trying to examine learner autonomy from its different definitions. Little (1991: 4) holds that learner autonomy is “essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning--a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action”. Dickinson (1987: 11) believes that learning autonomy is a “situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions”. Pemberton (1996: 3) treat it as “the techniques in order to direct one’s own learning”. In addition to that, others scholars try to clarify it by describing what an autonomous learner should be. Dam (1995:45) specifies that “a learner qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation.” Besides, some discuss it from its components. Benson & Voller (1997: 2) hold that the autonomy consists at least five phases, “for situations in which learners study entirely on their own; for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning; for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning”

These definitions, however, are far from explicit enough to be of pedagogical use. Therefore, in order to help learners enhance learner autonomy, Wenden (1998: 34) illustrates five general strategies:

- directed attention, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task;
- selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;
- self-monitoring, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks;
- self-evaluation, i.e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards;
- self-reinforcement, rewarding oneself for success.¹²

Such strategies outline the basic application with regard to learners. In order to guide learners more specifically, O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 44) recommend the following nine practical strategies:

- repetition, when imitating others' speech;
- resourcing, i.e., having recourse to dictionaries and other materials;
- translation, that is, using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and/or producing the target language;
- note-taking;
- deduction, i.e., conscious application of L2 rules;
- contextualization, when embedding a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence;
- transfer, that is, using knowledge acquired in the L1 to remember and understand facts and sequences in the L2;
- inferencing when matching an unfamiliar word against available information (a new word etc);
- question for clarification, when asking the teacher to explain, etc.

These strategies are quite explicit and handy for learners no matter what his command of language is. By following these strategies, learners are more available to the application.

2.3 Interactions

Teachers and learners are working on and with each other in the process of learning autonomy. As a result, a further look into their interactions is without question necessary. the teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interacting with each other · According to Smith (2001: 43-4), "Teachers also need to constantly reflect on their own role in the classroom, monitoring the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students' thinking and behavior, so as to engage students in autonomous and effective learning". If students want to learn to take control of their learning, the teacher may need to learn to let learners learn by themselves while providing necessary help. According to different circumstances, teachers' management of autonomy will vary respectively. But learner autonomy cannot be simplified only as freedom from the control of the teacher, freedom from the constraints of the curriculum, even freedom to choose not to learn. In fact, Berofsky (1997:43) considers that the most important freedom that autonomy implies is "the learner's freedom from self, by which we mean his or her capacity to transcend the limitations of personal heritage". In other words, learner autonomy implies the freedom of learners from educational and linguistic barriers. As a result, it is teachers' autonomy to cultivate a good environment for learners so that learners to acquire and practice the knowledge autonomously

3. CONCLUSION

In sum, it is important to understand not only teacher autonomy and learner autonomy, but also the interactive relationship between them in order to improve the learning autonomy in SLA.

REFERENCES

- Aoki, N. (2000). Aspects of teacher autonomy: Capacity, freedom and responsibility. Paper presented at 2000 Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Language Centre Conference.
- Benson, P. (2000). Autonomy as a learners' and teachers' right. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 111-117.
- Benton, Phil. & Peter, Voller. (1997). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*[M]. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Berofsky, B. (1997). *Liberation from self: A theory of personal autonomy*[M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Benson, P. (2001). Teaching and researching autonomy. *Language Learning*. London: Longman.
- Dam, L., (1995). *Learner Autonomy: From Theory to Classroom Practice*[M]. Dublin: Authentik.
- Dickinson, L., (1987). *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*[M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holec, H., (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*[M].. Pergamon, Oxford.
- Little, David.,(1991). *Learning Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*[M]. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System* 23/2. 175-182.
- O'Malley, J. M. and Chamot, A. V. (1990). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*[M]. London: Macmillan.
- Pemberton, H.D. et al.(1996). *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning*[M]. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Smith, R.C. (2000). Starting with ourselves: Teacher-learner autonomy in language learning. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 89-99.
- Smith, R.C., with A. Barfield. (2001). Interconnections: Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy (in 2 parts). *Language Learning* 7 & 8/1. 5-6.
- Wenden, A. (1998). *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*[M]. Great Britain: Prentice Hall.