Teachers' and Learners' Theories of Autonomy

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A couple of years ago I was teaching an English for Academic Purposes course to a group of Arts students at the University of Hong Kong, in which one of the tasks was a library search on a topic of the student's own choice. When the task was finished, one of the students, a Philosophy major, told me that his topic had been 'anything his lecturers had written'. His reason was that he was interested to know what they meant when they said that they 'did research'. For me he had come up with an obscure paper on autonomy that I had published a few years earlier (no reference!). He then told me that he was impressed that I 'did research', but that he didn't really understand what the point of my research was! At first I took this as a legitimate criticism of a paper that I was no longer very impressed with myself and I explained as best I could, mentioning that by asking the students to choose their own topics for the search, I was hoping to encourage them to exercise their autonomy as he done to a considerable degree. He then explained that what he really meant was this. Why do *language teachers* do research? Why don't they just teach languages? Again, I explained as best I could and he went away promising that he would think again about what I was trying to do in English course.

Meanwhile I have been doing some thinking of my own. If this same student were to sneak into the AILA Congress, he might well find that we are asking all manner of odd questions about him. How does he respond to 'communicative teaching'? What 'learning strategies' does he use? What does he 'believe' about language learning? And, once again, how can we help him become more 'autonomous'? It is quite likely that he would not understand what we are talking about because he lacks our training in and socialisation to the discourses of applied linguistics. But it is also quite likely that he would fail to see the 'point' of these questions, simply because they are from his point of view the wrong questions to be asking about learning a language.

Our questions are usually posed at a high level of theoretical abstraction and involve abstract constructs – such as autonomy – that allow us to discuss 'the language learner' in equally abstract terms. The questions that actual language learners ask, on the other hand, are much more concrete and relate to how they are learning specific aspects of specific languages here and now. Nor is this necessarily related to who 'we' (teachers and researchers) and 'they' (learners) are. I am also currently learning a foreign language, and I am not asking the same kind of questions about myself as a language learner that I would ask about others as a teacher and researcher. In fact, I am not particularly concerned about whether I am exercising or developing my autonomy or not – I am far to involved in practical problems of learning the language to worry about that!

Through these comments, I do not mean to suggest that we should necessarily stop talking about autonomy. I do want to suggest, though, that we might spend more time exploring how our theories of autonomy connect with the theories that learners themselves develop in the course of their learning. My comments on this will be tentative, because I am proposing, even more tentatively, a research agenda based on problems encountered in research, rather than the results of the research itself. The focus of this research agenda would be the points at which our theories of autonomy, which generally involve a high degree of abstraction, may intersect with learners' theories, which are generally situated within the particular context of 'what I am doing and why'.

The comments that follow are based on a recently completed interview-based study (carried out with David Nunan) of the English language learning careers of 31 undergraduate students at the University Hong Kong who mostly began learning English when they were three years old. One of the questions that interested us in this study was whether these learners were, in fact, autonomous (in the face of a widespread assumption that Hong Kong learners generally are not). Our answer to this question was 'yes': they certainly did appear to be far more autonomous that we would have judged them solely on the basis of their behaviour in our classrooms. The follow-up question was: how had they developed this autonomy over the course of their learning careers? Here the answer is more complex, but we can say here that they had done so in spite of their experiences in the classroom (perhaps as a reaction to them?) and certainly not because of their teachers efforts to help them become more autonomous. At least that is how it appeared to be from their point of view.

Beyond these conclusions, however, we were also interested to observe that the learners themselves did not use the term autonomy or related terms. This did not surprise us, because we did not expect them to be familiar with these terms. More interesting still, however, was the fact that their explanations of how they had developed as learners of English involved constructs related to 'autonomy' that appeared to be both very similar to and very different from our own. In order to clarify this point, I need to explain both where our understanding of autonomy came from and how we arrived at the judgement that the learners possessed a high degree of autonomy in terms of that understanding.

Here I will refer briefly to two definitions of autonomy in the literature. In my own research, I have defined autonomy as "the capacity to control one's own learning". Little (1991: p.49), on the other hand, tells us that "essentially, autonomy is a *capacity* – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action". Although I fear that Little's definition may be incomplete, I particularly like it because it specifies at least some of the more important abilities we need to develop in order to 'control our own learning'. At the same time, however, we would not expect a learner to tell us that developing a capacity for 'detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action' had been important to her learning of English. Our judgement that the participants had developed some degree of autonomy was, therefore, based on the inference that they had developed capacities of these kinds from what they said had happened to them. What they said, however, was rather different to the inference we drew from it.

The factors that the students themselves identified as being particularly important in their learning were:

- an awareness that English was a medium of communication rather than simply a subject they were learning at school
- an awareness that learning English was not just a matter of learning vocabulary and grammar, but rather a matter of learning how to communicate
- an awareness that English could not be learned in the classroom alone (and in some cases an awareness that it could no longer be learned in the classroom at all!)
- an awareness that the English they learned must be personally relevant in order for it to be worthwhile

The common factor here, of course, is 'communication' – a term that the participants used frequently in describing changes in their approaches to learning English that had usually occurred in their early or late adolescent years. From our point of view, the realisation that English was a medium of communication (and note that it tended to come at least 10 years into their learning!) was itself evidence of the development of a capacity for 'detachment and critical reflection' on the language,

their learning and their learning situation. Their descriptions of what they did as a result of this realisation, also gave us evidence of a capacity for decision making and independent action.

This led us to believe that, for these learners at least, the development of autonomy was closely tied up with the development of what we have called a 'communicative orientation' towards learning English. Elsewhere, I have argued that this may be a reason to re-evaluate our understanding of the role of communicative learning in the development of autonomy at a theoretical level (Benson, forthcoming). The 'the importance of communication' could also been seen as one point where our theories intersect with those of the learners. In other words, the participants in our study *did* talk about the 'the importance of communication' and here we were on common ground with them. But they did not talk about 'autonomy' or even 'detachment', 'critical reflection', 'decision making' and 'independent action'. From this point onwards we were on our own.

But I am also aware that I still haven't told you what the students *actually* said. Here are a few examples of what one student, Alison, told us during an interview:

But now that you want me to think back, I feel that during primary, kindergarten learning vocabulary is like… you will not know that it is a medium to communicate, you will feel that it is like those social sciences subjects in the past. It is something you just need to learn… It is only really in secondary that you feel that what you have to learn is one thing, what you have to make use of is another…

I feel that you really have to go out and practice… That is, for example, maybe you will have a conversation with others, at first you really don't know how to talk, express your meaning. But, for example, you will have improvement just like that…

I think, for example, learning English, you can also make use of it more. Also it is really around your body, you will have more contact with it…

These statements clearly show a 'communicative orientation' to learning English that, as Alison explains, developed only after she had been learning it for 7 years or more. I will leave it to you to decide whether they also show evidence of what we know as autonomy. My own comment is that if Alison is 'autonomous', she doesn't seem to know that she is in the same sense that she knows that communication is important in learning English. Our sense that she is 'autonomous' can only be a product of inference, not a product of what she has directly told us.

To conclude this paper, I want to remark that the inclusion of data of the kind quoted above is fairly unusual in the literature on autonomy. In general, we work at a high level of abstraction, often describing learners in terms of constructs that may have little direct meaning to them. This raises two questions for me, one concerning the kinds of theories that we value and the other concerning the ways in which we communicate with learners.

Discussion Questions
The first question is really one of whether our own abstract theories have any greater value than those of our learners. In making inferences from what learners tell us are we demonstrating our superior understanding of the issues involved in learning? Or are we simply translating the learners' situated theories into the more abstract discourses of our own rather rarefied world? In fact, Alison appears to know rather a lot about language learning. Should we just be listening to what she says, rather than interpreting it?