

# **Fostering Autonomy in the Language Classroom: Implications for Teacher Education**

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What sort of understanding of autonomy (learner as well as teacher autonomy) do student teachers have? To what extent can their verbal accounts of how they view learner autonomy, and their experience both as learners and student teachers, give us the opportunity to re-examine our practices in teacher education? Let's start with one example!

Claudia is a student teacher. She studies French and German at the University of Kassel in Germany. She is 26 and has completed a one-year practical training at a French school. English, French and Spanish were the languages she learnt at school.

## **Her Language Learning Career**

### *Learning at School*

Claudia learnt French at school in a conventional way. Her language classes were characterized by a sequence of predictable steps focusing on correctness in language reproduction. The experience she had at school as a language learner didn't enable her to develop any practical language competence at all.

### *Learning at University*

The way she learns at university is entirely different. She learns more "unconsciously" by reading French texts, watching French films or TV programs (p. 11/lines 369-370). Therefore, she has the impression of not progressing (p. 11/line 371) and feels helpless. This kind of helplessness stems from the fact that she is used to learning in "a systematic way", i.e., by going through a textbook. Yet, university classes don't provide any learning methods. She now has difficulty in carrying on with French because she didn't learn to self-direct her learning process (learning to learn) when she was at school.

## **Her Conceptions and Beliefs about Language Learning**

Her conception of learning is influenced by various key beliefs based on her own school experience:

- Learning means extending one's vocabulary
- There is no progress without hard work
- Correctness in language reproduction is the ultimate goal

She describes language learning as a linear process that revolves around acquiring as much vocabulary as possible and mastering grammar structures. The foreign language itself is viewed as a "study object", not as a means of communication. It is only possible to reach the ultimate goal and be proficient in a foreign language through hard and (regular) work.

## Her Conceptualization of Learner Autonomy

Her attitude towards this concept: By attending several subject-related didactics seminars at university, the student teacher has become familiar with the (theoretical) concept of “learner autonomy” and developed a positive attitude towards it. When I asked her what she found so interesting about that topic, she mentioned “an approach to teaching (p. 1/ line 22) she hadn’t experienced at school, but definitely approved of. Suddenly, you hear something and you think: yes, that’s exactly the way it is!” (laughter) (p. 1/line 23-24)

### *A Theoretical Approach*

She has a certain theoretical knowledge of the concept of *learner autonomy*. Following Holec (1980), she defines *autonomy* as the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning. Her understanding of learning is tantamount to a technical version of learner autonomy (compare with Benson 1997), which strongly relies on “training strategies”. She is also aware of the fact that learner autonomy is likely to bring about a change in the teacher-learner relationship as much as in the teacher’s role.

When I asked her what her definition of *an autonomous learner* was, she replied that he or she was the result of a (learning) process. For her, the autonomous learner epitomizes the ideal that ought to be pursued at school. While her statement emphasizes the process-oriented nature of the concept, it also bears the risk of presenting learner autonomy as the final and ultimate state to be aimed at, yet without any prospects of materializing (compare with Barbot and Camatarri 1999: 8-9). Furthermore, there is a risk of learner autonomy being reduced to a mere learning method.

### *An Approach Based on Previous Experience*

As a senior grade pupil, she was involved in the teaching process at high school. Against the background of her theoretical knowledge, she feels, on the one hand, “quite positive” about her school experience in retrospect. On the other hand, she is critical of the learner-oriented teaching and learning method which she found to be awkward, demanding and partly tantamount to “une transgression du principe selon lequel l’enseignant est détenteur du ‘savoir’ et de la ‘parole’ et une atteinte à la représentation de l’apprenant de la relation enseigné/enseignant et de la relation enseigné/savoir médiatisé par un enseignant” (André 1992: 69-70).

### *An Approach Based on her Perception of her Own Autonomy*

When I asked whether she regarded herself as an autonomous learner, she gave the following answer:

Am I truly an autonomous learner? No, I don’t think so. Still, considering the fact that I am able to plan my own schedule, that I manage to be organized and I am also aware of how I proceed whenever I have a university paper to write ... For that kind of task, I always have my own way of proceeding, my own view on how it should work. And, then, I tend to stick to it time and again. (...) But, to be a truly autonomous learner, I just think I am too lazy. (laughter)

HM: (laughter)

P9: I don't know. I think, I have a higher expectation of what it should ideally be, i.e., that one really sits down and learns vocabulary regularly or ...  
I always mean to do so and then ... or just do one grammar exercise per day, but ...  
In fact, I know pretty well what I actually have to do and what I want to do, but unfortunately, in the end I often don't do it.

She moves on to describing the "ideal learner": "... the autonomous learner appears to be a particular kind of person rather than a person who possesses particular cognitive skills or abilities that can be acquired" (Benson 2001: 86). Her conception of autonomy stems from different sources of knowledge that are partly contradictory. Nevertheless the whole concept in itself seems to be fairly coherent, and corresponds with her rather reproductive understanding of language learning (compare with Benson and Lor 1998). The decisive reversal of the pedagogic approach, which forms the basis of the "learner autonomy" concept, hasn't been properly implemented.

Claudia is one of many student teachers. One opposite type is Marie: Marie does not have any idea of the concept of autonomy but she has an active and intrinsically motivated approach to the learning tasks, initiates and manages her own learning both outside and within the context of formal instruction. She can be characterized as an autonomous learner.

Both of them belong to opposite poles on a scale between autonomous and non-autonomous. Between those two poles, there are a variety of profiles to be found. What can we learn from such case studies?

It seems to me that:

- Autonomy in practice does not (always) correspond to our theories on autonomy;
- The student teachers' reports are resources from which we ought to derive a curriculum for teacher development;
- Becoming aware of one's own understanding of learner autonomy and of one's own beliefs about language learning is a prerequisite to fostering learner and teacher autonomy;
- Consciousness can be raised through research within initial teacher training; and
- The student teacher has to become a researcher at the same time.

## References

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