

Stimulating Autonomy in the Foreign Language Classroom: Convincing the Teachers

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Introduction

The Brazilian system of forming foreign language teachers requires students (teachers-to-be) to carry on a training period of two semesters. In this period, they have to teach in primary and secondary schools of the community. During all their teaching practice, they are under the supervision of two other teachers: the school teacher and the course teacher of the university where the students are getting their degree (the licentiate). It is a controlled situation with little margin for improvisation and change. Therefore, what the future teachers do in their classes is to reproduce the vicious cycle of the past: teacher-centered classes and students who do not take responsibility for their learning. This is unfortunate because it means that the situation will not change in the near future. In other words, if the teachers are not autonomous themselves how can they develop their students' autonomy?

This paper reports a three-year research project which started in 1999 and is scheduled to present its results at the end of 2002. Its purposes are two-fold: 1) to investigate the real reasons why teachers in general are so reluctant to introduce autonomous behavior in the classroom, and 2) to suggest ways by which autonomous teaching and learning can be stimulated. Four universities (two public and two private), four university teachers, eight class teachers and sixteen students (teachers-to-be) are taking part in the research. The instruments used are: a) an investigation of documents coming from the Ministry of Education and State Education Secretary and of all their norms and acts related to teaching in general and foreign language teaching in particular; b) interviews with the university and school teachers and students (future teachers); and c) interviews with the school coordinators and principals. The results have demonstrated that internal aspects, such as submission to peer opinion and ideological tendencies, proved to be more relevant to explain the resistance to new teaching practices than external factors, like limits imposed by the Ministry of Education. It was also found that the university teachers and future teachers are more prompt to accept the idea of developing students' autonomy than the school teachers. Implications so far have pointed to some aspects like discussing the relationship between autonomy and learning with all the groups involved. Another aspect which is clear is the fact that the primary and secondary school teachers hold the "key" to any change in the educational setting.

Comments on the Educational Context Found

The investigation conducted on the documents issued by the Ministry of Education has led to the following remarks: the most important documents (National School Parameters and Curriculum Patterns) are mainly based on the studies of Vygotsky, Perrenoud, Shon, Fairclough., Freire, Moita Lopes and Celani. The concepts of interdisciplinarity and transversality, which present foreign language teaching and learning as instruments of construction and widening of the contents studied in other areas of knowledge, permeate the documents. The transversal themes introduced in the school programs – ethics, sexual orientation, environment, cultural plurality, health, work relations – should be dealt with by all disciplines and all teachers, according to the documents. This, theoretically, would not only force teachers to work together, but would also contribute to form

citizens, who “will be critical and conscious of their actions and responsible for the consequences of these actions” (Curriculum Patterns 1996). “Independence and auto-determination imply the capacity of critical evaluation, of rational defense of arguments” (School Parameters 1998). As can be observed, the Ministry of Education and the State Education Secretary have, at least in theory, acknowledged the role autonomy has in learning. How this should be implemented remains a question to be answered.

The investigation conducted with the university teachers, school teachers and future teachers has led us to conclude that there is a wide gap between the university teachers and the school teachers – a mixture of suspicion and indifference. It is an asymmetrical relationship which makes it difficult for them to work together on any educational matter. The school teachers are afraid of changes; specifically they are afraid of other teachers’ opinion (peer pressure), they fear to “lose control”, they know little about developing students’ autonomy and they dismiss any attempt in this direction with comments such as “it won’t work in this school, it won’t work with my group of students”. The university teachers have not yet taken the necessary steps to narrow the gap, either because they don’t know how to do it or because, deep inside, they consider themselves “superior”, in which case working with school teachers would mean being “less academically oriented”. This is true for teachers of both private and public universities. The students (future teachers) are exposed, in their undergraduate years, to different methodological approaches, most of them with sound theoretical foundations. Their teachers at the university generally have MAs or PhDs in TEFL or Applied Linguistics. However, students complain that they lack the necessary abilities to “jump” from the theory to the practical aspects of the real classroom situation. They also complain that they have to face many limits; in some schools not even the student seating arrangements can be changed. The interviews with the administrative staff (principals for example) have been the most difficult. Few of them knew what autonomy really means – they repeated jargon such as “in our schools students and teachers are critical, reflexive ...”

Some Reflections and Considerations about the Findings

I started this work with some preconceived ideas about teachers, learners, school principals and the Ministry of Education. Sometimes I was right, sometimes I was wrong, but I must confess that I have learned a lot (like everybody who is involved with research that deals with real people). Anyway, I’ll try now to join some loose ends to come up with something useful. Probably most of my comments are not new, but I hope they can add to the discussion on autonomy.

1. A combination of approaches has to be used to implement autonomous behaviour in our schools and universities. The first step has already been taken: seminars, meetings, articles in recognized journals, with the purpose of clarifying some aspects of autonomy which remain obscure. A second step is happening at the moment: thesis and dissertations on some of the most important masters and PhD programs in the country, dealing with developing students’ autonomy; this will lead us to more sound research. A third step is not happening as frequently as it should: to develop activities (and to test them) that may lead to more autonomy in our classrooms. Although the theoretical clarification is important, we need more action research about the everyday problems of teaching (and learning).
2. The school teachers are the “key” to starting and developing autonomous learners. Of course, to convince them we need the results of action research and we need them working with action research. It would be necessary to clarify some aspects of autonomy, such as to explain it more as a learning tool and less as an ideological trend.

3. Although autonomy is an ideologically loaded concept (it started as such and it would be silly to deny it), I think we need to direct our studies on autonomous behaviour towards a more “scientific” and less “ideological” practice. This would bring to our side many researchers who are afraid of the ideology that autonomy carries. It would also “attract” the school teachers that are afraid of the “leftist” direction that they imagine the concept implies.