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Autonomy, context, and ‘appropriate methodology’

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Abstract

Is the promotion of learner autonomy just the latest top-down fashion in language teaching, or does it have a more universal, lasting significance? In this paper I provide examples from various historical and cultural contexts to show why I believe the promotion of a ‘strong’ version of pedagogy for autonomy is not just a passing trend, is not the invention of ‘experts’, and can be a particularly appropriate idea in non-western as in western classroom settings. I begin with historical examples which show that pedagogy for autonomy is not a new idea, although it might have been called by different names in the past and has remained, and probably still remains a minority pursuit in practice. I then consider how notions of autonomy seem to be spreading world-wide these days, and I attempt to show that this does not necessarily involve a western ‘imposition’ on non-western contexts, although over-simplistic interpretations which equate ‘developing autonomy’ with technology or top-down strategy training do seem to court this danger. I conclude that pedagogy for learner autonomy will continue to be valid in many contexts whether or not autonomy is simply the latest fashion in mainstream discourse on language education. However, if pedagogy for autonomy is to become genuinely mainstream *in practice* there is a continuing need for theories and ideas to be derived *out of* attempts by teachers to engage in appropriate (context-sensitive) experimentation, and to share insights regarding their practice, in resistance to the ever-changing fashions in top-down discourse on language education to which they are so often subjected.

Introduction

The starting point for this article is the way that autonomy, from one point of view, may seem to be no more than the latest vogue in language teaching, the most recent in a succession of fashionable ideas which have been developed by western applied linguists, transferred downwards to classroom teachers, and exported outwards to so-called 'periphery' settings (Phillipson 1992). Is the promotion of learner autonomy just the latest top-down fashion, or does it have a more universal, lasting significance? In this paper I shall provide examples from various historical and cultural contexts to show why I believe the promotion of a particular, 'strong' version of pedagogy for autonomy is not just a passing trend, is not the invention of 'experts', and can be a particularly appropriate idea in non-western as in western classroom settings.

1. Is pedagogy for autonomy really so new?

It is evident that fashions have come and gone with alarming frequency in the world of foreign language teaching, and it seems possible that autonomy too, having risen to prominence recently in a number of European and Asian countries, might sooner or later be superseded by newer concerns. Evidence for the current 'vogue' for autonomy comes from the increasing number of related publications and conferences over the last five or so years. But is autonomy just a passing fad? In this section I show why what might be termed a 'strong version' of classroom-based pedagogy for autonomy has a more durable significance, with reference to some examples from the past.

If we look back into the history of language teaching, we can see that the idea that teachers should pursue learner autonomy, encourage reflective learning, or 'teach students to learn' is by no means a new one, although it has only been phrased in these terms and become 'mainstream' in recent years. In 1853, Claude Marcel (1793–1876) – an early but neglected pioneer in the development of a principled,

educational basis for modern language teaching – stated his belief that ‘a good Method favours Self-teaching’ (Marcel 1853: 203), and elaborated on this as follows (ibid.):

One of the chief characteristics of a good method consists in enabling learners to dispense with the assistance of a teacher when they are capable of self-government. It should be so contrived as to excite and direct their spontaneous efforts, and lead them to the conviction that they have the power, if they have the will, to acquire whatever man has acquired.

Marcel was to some extent influenced by the ideas of Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840), an even more radical (indeed, Revolutionary) thinker, whose wide-ranging system of universal education and ‘intellectual emancipation’ was derived not only from political conviction but also from direct experience of French as a foreign language teaching in exile, at the University of Louvain in 1818 (see Howatt 1984: 150–2). Indeed, Jacotot has a good claim to being a ‘founding father’ of pedagogy for autonomy in language education. His principles were expounded and promoted in England by Joseph Payne (1808–76), who interpreted them as implying – among other things – that the pupil should be taught to ‘make his own reflections, not to receive those made by others’ (Payne 1830: 363) and thus ‘be made to discover for himself everything requisite to be known’ (Payne 1830: 337).

With regard to the teacher’s role, Payne’s view, based on his own practice as well as his understanding of Jacotot, was that:

the teacher must . . . be careful to explain nothing, – to interrogate perpetually, – to make the pupil discover his own errors, and justify everything performed by himself.

(Payne 1830: 381)

Reflective teaching played an important part as well: Payne was, it seems, so inspired by Jacotot’s principles that ‘they entirely changed his notion of the teacher’s office, and *turned routine into a course of never-ending experiment and discovery*’ (Quirk 1880: 3; emphasis added). This fits in well with the insight

developed by present-day practitioners engaged in pedagogy for autonomy (not least within the GT-PA) that this kind of engagement can empower the teacher as much as students. I shall return to this point below.

In summary of the above, it seems that 'teaching students to learn' is not simply the latest language teaching fashion, but can be related to deeper, older educational conceptions and traditions:

The highest and best teaching is not that which makes the pupils passive recipients of other peoples' ideas (not to speak of the teaching which conveys mere words without any ideas at all), but that which guides and encourages the pupils in working for themselves and thinking for themselves.

(Quick 1890: 421)

In the history of western education, then, a focus on developing learner autonomy is not as new as is commonly supposed, although it has probably never been particularly widespread in practice and although notable proponents including Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel as well as Jacotot and Payne conveyed their ideas without using the word 'autonomy'. The same might be said for a variety of more recent practitioners: Caleb Gattegno, with his emphasis (in *The Silent Way*) on 'subordinating teaching to learning', for example, and Charles Curran, whose Community Language Learning approach enables students to determine the contents and course of instruction (see Richards and Rodgers 1986 for more detail). Benson (2001) provides information on other twentieth-century educationalists, including John Dewey, Carl Rogers and Paulo Freire, who are clearly 'pro-autonomy' without describing themselves in this manner.

All of the figures so far mentioned, including even Rousseau, would probably agree on the following two points: firstly, the teacher's role in guiding, or supporting students' development of autonomy is crucial (thus, I have been careful to refer to them as precursors in promoting *pedagogy for autonomy*, not just autonomy in the abstract), and, secondly, the teacher's role is radically

different from that in more ‘conventional’ pedagogy. As Quick (1880: 5–6) records,

Jacotot exposed himself to the jeers of schoolmasters by asserting that a teacher who understood his business could “teach what he did not know.” By *teacher* is usually understood one who communicates knowledge. This meaning of the word, however, was unsatisfactory to Jacotot and to his English disciple [i.e. Payne]. What is knowledge? Knowledge is the abiding result of some action of the mind. Whoever causes the mind of pupils to take the necessary action *teaches* the pupils. Thus we see that Jacotot’s paradox points to a new conception of the teacher’s function. The teacher is not one who “tells,” but one who sets the learner’s mind to work, directs it and regulates the rate of advance. . . . The same notion of the teacher is found in the utterances of other men, especially of Pestalozzi and Froebel.

What can we gain, though, by looking back into the past and identifying significant precursors in this manner? I believe it can help us to see beneath a number of present-day misconceptions which have accompanied the recent ‘rise’ of autonomy, as I shall attempt to show in the following sections.

2. Pedagogy for autonomy: a ‘strong’ version

One point which comes across strongly if we take a historical view is that, even if the value of ‘pedagogy for autonomy’ (under different names) has been recognised in a variety of contexts in the past, this has never been a mainstream approach, indeed its proponents have had to battle against numerous misconceptions and prejudices and have generally failed to establish their ideas in their original form more widely. Thus, Jacotot’s ideas gained a certain currency in the 1830s but only at the expense of numerous attempts by materials writers and pamphleteers to reduce them to a new ‘method’, for personal profit (Payne’s (1830) pamphlet was an exception in this respect); as a consequence, his ideas were diluted even as they were diffused, and subsequently even in their reduced form were increasingly ignored rather than being put widely into practice (see Howatt and Smith, 2000: xxii, xxxviii).

It is tempting to find parallels in the current rise to prominence of learner autonomy. Classroom-based pedagogy for autonomy can be seen to have resurfaced in language education in the mid-1970s (Leni Dam's 'Experiment in Beginning English' began in Denmark in 1975 (Legenhausen 2001: 69), while Riley and Gremmo (1995: 155) cite also the work of Turid Trebbi and Rita Gjørven in Norway). Further experiments with pedagogy for autonomy were carried out by other practitioners, particularly in Scandinavia, and, with the assistance of the Council of Europe, comparable practice was extended across a number of European countries in the 1980s (cf. Holec 1988). However, it was only in the mid-1990s, with the incorporation of learner autonomy as a goal in national curricula across Europe, that learner autonomy was 'mainstreamed' in secondary school modern language education.

In this process of becoming mainstream, some ideas connected with learner autonomy have proved to be more marketable than others. It is not necessarily the case, then, that the 'strong' version of pedagogy for autonomy promoted by Dam and others has become much more widespread than previously, *in practice*. In order to support this point, I need to define further what I mean by a 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy, and to contrast this with other, 'weak' versions which have become attached to the autonomy 'bandwagon'.

What I mean by a 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy is one in which there is a conscious attempt on the part of the teacher to shift the initiative in decision-making to classroom learners. The teacher attempts to relinquish the 'expert role' which characterises more conventional 'pedagogies of dependence' (Vieira 1999); instead, identities such as 'counsellor', 'facilitator', 'resource person' (Voller 1997), 'negotiator' and even 'ethnographer' (Smith 1997a) come to the fore. In practice students might be engaged in taking charge of classroom-based learning in as many of the following areas as possible: 'determining the objectives; defining the contents and the progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition . . . (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been acquired' (Holec, 1981: 3). Via this shift of control, and

by engaging students in ongoing reflection on their (self-directed) learning, the teacher aims to develop students' ability to learn for themselves, in other words attempts, through experiential and reflective means, to foster autonomy in Little's (1991: 4) definition: 'a *capacity* – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action'. Dam (1995) provides perhaps the fullest description to date of this kind of practice in a secondary school context.

However, as 'autonomy' has gained a mainstream status in the field of language education over the last few years, it has been associated with many things, not all of them consistent with the 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy to which I have been referring. In particular, with the spread of ICT and self-access centres, a 'technological' interpretation is often placed on autonomy which seems to give the teacher only a very restricted role. While students may be enabled to exercise autonomy in a computer-centred learning environment, doing so does not necessarily develop their autonomous learning capacities, and for this the teacher's (or at least a 'counsellor's') role continues to be crucial. Another strand of influence in the recent rise to prominence of autonomy has been research into 'effective' language learning strategies, with associated recommendations being made, particularly by North American researchers, for widespread 'strategy training'. However, as Little (in Dam, Little, Katsura and Smith, 1999: 42) has cautioned, the expert role of the teacher may be largely unaffected in this kind of approach, and 'Forms of strategy training that resemble drill and practice have nothing whatsoever to do with the development of learner autonomy'. When we talk of autonomy gaining mainstream status, then, we have to consider whether what has really gained in popularity is the experiential 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy whose pedigree I have outlined above or the new technologies and top-down strategy training suggestions which are often more typically associated nowadays with the word 'autonomy'.

In combination, technological and strategy training-based suggestions may constitute a mainstream, deradicalised, or 'weak' version of developing learner autonomy which has been widely subscribed to in part because it poses little

threat to traditional 'pedagogies of dependence' and because it can be so easily packaged (within commercial learning materials, for example) and 'sold' in various contexts. It seems quite possible that the reductionism involved in this weak version *will* make it just as much of a passing fashion as Jacotot's (misinterpreted) ideas in the 1830s. 'Autonomy' might, as a consequence, cease – sooner or later – to be a mainstream goal in language education as the next 'displacement of interest' (Puren 1988) takes effect in top-down applied linguistic discourse. However, the practitioner-derived 'tradition' of pedagogy for autonomy which I have outlined above is of more than passing interest, and is likely to continue to represent a valid, though far from widespread approach, involving as it does a much more significant challenge to established norms of teaching. In sum, pedagogy for autonomy is unlikely to disappear, even if discussion of autonomy 'goes out of fashion': it has always been a minority pursuit in European contexts, developing out of classroom experience and strongly supported by a few practitioners, and this seems to be as true nowadays as it has always been.

3. How can pedagogy for autonomy be 'appropriate'?

With its rise to mainstream status in western contexts, autonomy has been seen as the latest in a long line of ideas on language teaching to be exported inappropriately to non-western settings (Jones 1995, Ho and Crookall 1995), indeed this kind of 'export' has been regarded as a covert form of western cultural imperialism. Thus, Jones (1995: 229) claims that:

. . . no matter what guise autonomy may take, it remains a Western idea, and may come upon the traditions and conventions of Cambodian education with the force of ideological imposition, promoting a type of behaviour that conflicts with the national culture at a deep level.

(Jones, 1995: 230)

In previous work (Aoki and Smith 1999, Smith 1997b) I have attempted to counter objections such as these, with reference to the mistaken assumptions regarding both autonomy and culture which seem to underlie them, as well as (indirectly) to my own classroom practice in Japan. In this paper, I would like to take a different approach, considering what might be appropriate or inappropriate as forms of *pedagogy* for autonomy in non-western contexts. I take the following claim by Little (1999: 15–16) as a starting point:

If the potential for autonomy is a human universal and the purpose of education is to help learners to develop tools for critical reflection, it follows as a matter of principle that learner autonomy is an appropriate pedagogical goal in all cultural settings. . . . [But] it must grow, quasi-organically, out of the ongoing encounter between the critical goals of the educational enterprise and the particularities of cultural context.

Again, historical examples are of value here. Persuasive arguments have been offered to show that educational and/or cultural traditions in various Asian countries can in fact be seen as supportive of the goal of learner autonomy, and that various forms of ‘pedagogy for autonomy’ have been developed by insiders to these contexts in the past. As in Europe (see section 1 above), such approaches cannot be seen as ‘mainstream’; instead, their promotion generally reflects the concerns of educators committed to the transformation of learning and teaching arrangements in those contexts. With regard specifically to Japan, China and Thailand, for example, Aoki (1994), Pierson (1996) and Kirtikara (1997) have given examples of forms of autonomous learning within the educational traditions of Asian cultures. Indeed, Kirtikara (1997) goes so far as to argue – ironically, in view of the arguments cited above with regard to cultural imperialism being carried out these days in the name of autonomy – that it was the introduction of ‘western-style (formal) learning’ which caused a decline in traditional forms of autonomous learning in Thailand (Canagarajah 1999: 108–9 presents similar observations with regard to the deleterious influence of British-imposed colonial education in Sri Lanka). Nowadays, Kirtikara argues, ‘formal learning has become oppressive’, with students being ‘spoon-fed, to regurgitate at

exam time from texts', and he concludes that it is important to 'rediscover' autonomy in the traditions of Thai rural contexts.

Thus, strong arguments for the validity of pedagogy for autonomy have come from insiders to Asian contexts, who identify antecedents within the history of these contexts in much the same way as I have attempted to identify a western 'tradition' of pedagogy for autonomy in section 1 above. Autonomy is not necessarily an exclusively 'western' idea, it might be concluded, although, as in the west, it may have been called by different names and promoted with different emphases from context to context. In many places, it seems, what might be termed pedagogy for autonomy has been experimented with as a minority pursuit, surfacing in various guises in various world-wide settings.

One point (implicit in Kirtikara's remarks above) which should be reemphasised here is that western education systems themselves (including those imposed in other contexts in the past as part of the colonial 'enterprise') are not necessarily as supportive of the goal of learner autonomy as seems to be implicit in characterisations of autonomy as a 'Western idea'. Thus, the pursuit of autonomy – until very recently a minority interest in the European context – might appear to be a particularly unlikely target for accusations of cultural imperialism (cf. Little 1999: 12).

Nevertheless, it does seem to be the case that certain forms of method ('strategy training', for example) or medium (including self-access) are being 'marketed' in non-western (as in western) contexts in the name of autonomy. There are without doubt dangers in the export and imposition of 'weak', pre-packaged approaches to autonomy which need to be addressed and avoided. Their spread can give rise to justified concerns about the inappropriate top-down / centre to periphery imposition of ideas on teachers and learners, and the article by Jones cited above (which highlights the inappropriateness of individualistic arrangements implicit in self-access centre design for Cambodia) can be read as a legitimate warning in this respect (cf. also Benson's (1994: 4) suggestion that 'learner training tends to

position learners in terms of a model of the rational, liberal-democratic individual' and that 'Arguably, this is an ethnocentric model').

A strong version of pedagogy for autonomy can, on the other hand, be seen as an exemplary form of 'appropriate methodology' (Holliday 1994) because it is necessarily context-sensitive (cf. Vieira 1999), depending for its form on the contributions of learners, negotiation with them of learning arrangements, and ongoing 'ethnographic research' on the part of the teacher into the resulting classroom culture (Smith 1997a). In other words:

It might be the case . . . that the types of 'good language learner' strategy training and/or materials-centred self-access arrangements which are frequently recommended (in both western and Asian contexts) in the name of autonomy tend to involve a greater degree of top-down decision-making, and hence potential for 'inappropriate imposition' than approaches where the enhancement of student control over decision-making (that is, actual self-direction of learning) is made a basic priority.

(Smith 2001: 80)

The debate on the appropriateness of autonomy in non-western contexts has helped us to see more clearly what autonomy is and is not, and to recognise that even if the potential for autonomy is universal (Little 1996, cited above), universal pedagogical solutions are not going to be appropriate. Instead, context-sensitive approaches are required (cf. Smith 2001), and I have suggested above that a 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy can represent a particularly appropriate bottom-up strategy, in non-western as in western contexts. The debate has also shown that there is a need for more teacher-research and less theorising from stereotypes or abstract principles in order for appropriate pedagogy to be developed, and for sensible things to be said about learner autonomy in non-western contexts.

It seems important, then, to build appropriate pedagogy from the bottom up on the basis of investigating what is desirable and feasible with learners in particular contexts. This involves, I have implied, a process of continual investigation, in

other words, from the practitioner's perspective, different forms of action research (cf. Moreira, Vieira and Marques 1999). In turn, educators in many contexts may discover, like Joseph Payne (cited above) that engagement in pedagogy for autonomy can change 'routine into a course of never-ending experiment and discovery' and that *they*, not outside experts, hold the key to the appropriate promotion and theorising of learner autonomy.

Conclusion

Above I have shown that pedagogy for autonomy is not a new idea, although it might have been called by different names in the past and has remained, and probably still remains a 'minority pursuit' in practice. I then broadened the discussion geographically to consider how notions of autonomy seem to be spreading world-wide these days, and I attempted to show that this does not necessarily involve a western 'imposition' on non-western contexts, although over-simplistic interpretations which equate 'developing autonomy' with technology or top-down strategy training do seem to court this danger. By these means – through reference to historical and world-wide experience – I have argued that pedagogy for learner autonomy will continue to be valid in many contexts whether or not autonomy is simply the latest fashion in mainstream discourse on language education. More positively, if pedagogy for autonomy is to become genuinely mainstream *in practice* there is a continuing need for theories and ideas to be derived *out of* attempts by teachers to engage in and share insights regarding appropriate (context-sensitive) experimentation, in resistance to the ever-changing fashions in top-down discourse on language education to which they are so often subjected.

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