

Teacher-learner autonomy

Programme goals and student-teacher constructs

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Responding to needs for clarity of definition in the area of ‘teacher autonomy’, the first, relatively theoretical, part of this paper discusses different dimensions of this notion. It then argues for the goal within initial teacher education of enhancing ‘teacher-learner autonomy’, defined here as ‘the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others’. A brief description of one approach to working towards this goal within pre-service teacher education then follows, together with a summary of evaluations of the approach to date. The second part of the paper reports on a more innovative investigation (employing repertory-grid interviews) of students’ personal constructs in relation to particular elements of the course design. The findings are discussed in relation to the theory of teacher autonomy and the design of appropriate interventions. Finally, we highlight the potential wider value of repertory-grid and follow-up interviews for eliciting students’ personal learning theories with minimum interviewer bias.

Defining and developing teacher autonomy (Richard Smith)

Dimensions of teacher autonomy

The concept of ‘teacher autonomy’ has been frequently referred to within the literature on language learner autonomy in recent years, but there have been relatively few attempts to clarify the meaning, or meanings of this term. This seems to be unsatisfactory for a number of reasons:

- If we are to debate the theoretical importance or otherwise of teacher autonomy within our own discourse community, we need some kind of shared understanding regarding what it means, or what we intend it to mean;
- If teacher autonomy is important to us, then it needs not only to be argued for at a theoretical level but also promoted within teacher education programmes,

and innovations in this area need to be carefully reported on. But such actions require clear definitions of goals and outcomes.

- If our views on teacher and learner autonomy are to be taken seriously beyond our own discourse community, we should engage in “more than an act of faith” (Sinclair 1999); in other words, alongside theoretical speculation and practical innovation, we need to adopt a self-critical and evaluative approach, involving clear clarification of our values and goals as educators, and research into their achievement or otherwise.

In a previous paper (Smith 2003) I argued that rather than being easily reducible to one definition, the concept of ‘teacher autonomy’ can be seen to have several dimensions. Two dimensions were previously identified by McGrath (2000) as (1) self-directed professional action (p. 109) or development (p. 100), and (2) freedom from control by others (p. 101). While useful as a starting-point, this bipolar distinction requires further unpacking, for the following reasons:

- Professional action (i.e. teaching) and development (‘teacher-learning’) need to be distinguished, since they are not necessarily the same thing: however self-directed we may be in our teaching, we do not necessarily *learn* in a self-directed way; conversely, we may learn as teachers from many sources, not just teaching itself.
- A distinction needs to be made, and generally is made in relation to learning in the learner autonomy literature, between *capacity* for and/or *willingness* to self-direct one’s learning (or teaching) and actual self-directed learning (or teaching) *behaviour*, with the term ‘autonomy’ being reserved for the former.

On the basis of these further distinctions, the following might serve to clarify the different dimensions of teacher autonomy as this term is being used nowadays in the domain of second language education, influenced as this domain is by ideas relating to *learner* autonomy:

Table 1. Dimensions of teacher autonomy

In relation to professional action:

A. Self-directed professional action	i.e. ‘Self-directed teaching’
B. Capacity for self-directed professional action	i.e. ‘Teacher autonomy (capacity to self-direct one’s teaching)’
C. Freedom from control over professional action	i.e. ‘Teacher autonomy (freedom to self-direct one’s teaching)’

In relation to professional development:

D. Self-directed professional development	i.e. 'Self-directed teacher-learning'
E. Capacity for self-directed professional development	i.e. 'Teacher-learner autonomy (capacity to self-direct one's learning as a teacher)'
F. Freedom from control over professional development	i.e. 'Teacher-learner autonomy (freedom to self-direct one's learning as a teacher)'

On the left above are possible dimensions of teacher autonomy which emerge from the foregoing discussion; on the right are mutually distinctive alternative expressions which might be useful when we need to clarify which dimension(s) we are referring to.

Teacher education for the promotion of learner autonomy

The above might help to shed light on ways in which teacher autonomy and the promotion of pedagogy for learner autonomy are related. The conviction that such a relationship exists seems to have motivated current use of the term 'teacher autonomy' in the second language education field, and is made explicit in the title of this volume, but, as we can now see, different dimensions of teacher autonomy have tended to be highlighted by different authors. Thus, in order to promote learner autonomy, teachers may need to have:

- Teacher autonomy as *capacity* to self-direct one's teaching (Little 2000; McGrath 2000, Thavenius 1999; Vieira e.g. 1999, 2000);
- Teacher autonomy as *freedom* to self-direct one's teaching (Benson 2000: 115-116; also, Breen and Mann 1997; Lamb 2000);
- Teacher-learner autonomy as capacity to self-direct one's *learning* as a teacher (Little 2000; see also Smith 2000).

Within our field 'teacher autonomy' sometimes seems to be used rather loosely as a synonym for the 'capacity to promote learner autonomy'. However, this kind of capacity is not exactly the same thing as any, or all of the dimensions identified above. Rather, different authors have argued that particular dimensions of teacher autonomy might be necessary as *conditions* for the promotion of learner autonomy. This leaves open the question of what kinds of knowledge, know-how and attitude are (additionally) necessary. Defining this kind of knowledge base for the preparation of autonomy-oriented teachers is an important enterprise, but limiting it from the outset, in an *a priori* fashion, to the notion of 'teacher autonomy' does not seem likely to provide the necessary answers. We do not yet know enough

about the reasons why teachers begin to engage in pedagogy for autonomy, or the support mechanisms which enable them to do so to generalize confidently in this area (for some indications of the kind of knowledge basis that will be required, see, however, Holec 1979: 24–26; 1981: 16–18; Breen and Mann 1997). Nevertheless, on the basis of previous discussions and (the few) reports of teacher education experience in this field, it does seem possible to propose certain general precepts for ‘teacher education for the promotion of learner autonomy’ which relate to the development of teachers’ or student-teachers’ own autonomy (see also Smith 2003). For example:

- Attempting to convince teachers of the value of learner autonomy in the abstract can be argued to be insufficient. In addition, or as a basis, it seems necessary to tap into or focus on the development of teachers’ own autonomy, in some or all of the dimensions identified above.
- Enabling teachers and student-teachers to actually experience ways of promoting learner autonomy appears to be particularly powerful, the more so when (as in the work of Flávia Vieira and her colleagues in Portugal) such experience is explicitly linked to an action research orientation and/or when there is an effective support network of teachers similarly engaged.
- Preparing teachers to engage in such experiences is another matter, however, and there are likely to be various possible approaches (one of which will be described below).
- In contexts which are divorced from real classroom teaching situations, it might be most appropriate for teacher educators to concentrate on developing a general willingness and *capacity* for self-directed teaching and teacher-learning, linked to induction into a pedagogy for learner autonomy, while acknowledging and as far as possible preparing teachers to address the constraints which might operate in practice on their actual *freedom* in these areas.

Teacher-learner autonomy as a goal in its own right

It should be noted that, independently of any advocacy of autonomy in language learning, there are powerful arguments for promoting teacher autonomy and teacher-learner autonomy as capacities to self-direct one’s teaching and teacher-learning, respectively, in any teacher education setting. Indeed, the idea that teacher education programmes should promote these capacities is recognized, in theory at least, in many contexts, under the influence of notions of ‘reflective practice’

(Schön 1983) and related conceptions of the ‘teacher-as-researcher’. As Widdowson (1993: 25) put it, more than a decade ago:

[The] view of the dependent teacher has been challenged over recent years. It has been argued that [...] effective pedagogy is necessarily a reflective and research-oriented activity, that the role of practitioner does not preclude that of theorist, and that the professional status of teachers as mediators depends on the justification of an appropriate expertise of their own.

Experiences of critical reflection on materials (as described by McGrath 2000) or, indeed, reflection by student-teachers or teachers on any aspect of teaching have been promoted for some time now as means for developing teacher autonomy, viewed as the general capacity to self-direct one’s own teaching.

What has not been so frequently discussed within the literature on teacher education is, more specifically, how to develop teachers’ capacities to self-direct their own *learning*, involving the ability to identify when, where, how and from what sources they (can and should) learn, including but not confined to the learning they can achieve via teaching (see Barfield and Smith 1999 on appropriate conference design for the promotion of teacher-learning, for example, and Smith 2000 for insights into the learning of languages by teachers). In order for teachers to gain better abilities and a greater willingness to learn for themselves in developing “an appropriate expertise of their own” – whether or not this is tied to the promotion of learner autonomy with students – engagement in and reflection on self-directed teacher-learning, not only self-directed teaching, can be seen to be essential. In sum, while something akin to ‘teacher-learner autonomy’ has been seen as one of the privileged conditions for the promotion of pedagogy for autonomy with language learners (Little 1995, 2000; Vieira 1997, 1999), it can also be seen as an important goal in its own right (Barfield and Smith 1999; Smith 2000, 2003), being the engine which powers career-long professional development.

It is particularly in this area of *teacher-learning*, I would suggest, that insights from research into language learner autonomy might have something new to contribute to the field of general teacher education, including with regard to how to implement a pedagogy for (teacher-)learner autonomy in teacher education programmes.

*Developing teacher-learner autonomy in practice:
An innovation and its ongoing evaluation*

In the light of the above discussion, teacher educators may need to adopt their own pedagogy for (teacher-)learner autonomy, as one component in appropriately preparing teachers to engage in a pedagogy for autonomy with language learners; but,

as I have also argued, there are wider justifications for such an approach, relating to needs to prepare teachers for career-long professional development.

In my own pre-service teacher education work, with students working towards their MA in English Language Studies and Methods at the University of Warwick, I have been engaged in developing a set of practices which have increasingly been intended explicitly to promote teacher-learner autonomy, viewed as the capacity to self-direct one's own learning as a teacher. Thus, borrowing from and adapting the Bergen definition of learner autonomy (Trebbs 1990), my colleagues and I have set as a major goal the promotion of an "ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others".

Our current assumptions and practice in this area can be described briefly as follows. The students we are working with, who come from a variety of countries, enter this MA programme with little or no substantial teaching experience. In Term One of the programme, we offer a core Introduction to ELT course which relies heavily on reflection by students on their own prior learning experience. Students are encouraged to identify positive as well as less beneficial aspects of this experience, and to build their own theories of language teaching on this basis, with a view to the development of appropriate methodology for their own future teaching contexts. Students are introduced to ideas current in 'central' ELT discourse, including the concept of learner autonomy and associated practices, but we tend to place great emphasis on the importance of their developing a critical viewpoint on these ideas. By the end of Term One, students are in a position to plan lessons and to justify their plans in relation both to current theory and to contextual considerations. The core Term Two Professional Practice module which will be focused on in this paper provides students with an opportunity to try out their lesson plans in a peer-teaching situation. Beyond this, however, the course is designed, according to an action research model, to develop students' abilities to evaluate their teaching and to engage in largely self-directed investigations (interviewing other teachers, observing lessons and analysing a transcript of their peer-teaching, as well as reading in an area of particular relevance to their own self-improvement), with a view to preparing for a second peer-teaching / self-evaluation experience towards the end of the ten-week term.

The Professional Practice course has developed year by year on the basis of our own action research, some of which has been previously reported (Smith, Alagöz, Brown and İçmez 2003; Smith 2006; Brown, Smith and Ushioda 2007). We have seen, in broad terms, that there are difficulties as well as benefits involved in the course, but that the benefits outweigh the problems, from students' perspectives (Smith et al. 2003). We have also become more conscious and explicit in our goal of developing students' autonomy as learners of teaching, partly as a consequence of students themselves seeing this as an outcome of the course. We have also ac-

knowledge and succeeded in identifying some of the particular difficulties of the transition to relatively self-directed ways of working, and have increased our efforts to ease this transition.

In 2002 we began to evaluate the development in students' perceptions more systematically than before, using questionnaires with items derived from individual students' reflective writing (Smith 2006). Repetition of the questionnaire in the middle and at the end of the course enabled us to discern overall changes in attitudes (from negative to positive), and signs of increasing autonomy were also identified.

The focus of our own action research has, then, moved towards identifying how students perceive the course at different stages overall, and towards clarifying better both our own goals and the extent to which the course is meeting these goals. As a consequence, we feel that we have become more confident and skilled than before in predicting possible confrontations between students' and our own expectations, and so in easing the transition to autonomy.

One direction we have felt a need to move in is to refine the means we use to access individual students' perceptions, in order better to support these or future, similar students. We perceive a need, in other words, not just to collect aggregate data but to access individuals' perspectives more effectively. To some extent, reflective writing by students and tutorials with them can provide such individual insights. But one disadvantage is that students may tend to write and tell us what they think we want to hear. In this connection, the insights provided below by Sultan Erdoğan, who engaged in in-depth 'repertory-grid' and follow-up interviews with selected students in 2002, seem to show a new way forward.

Student-teachers' constructs (Sultan Erdoğan)

Background

In 2001–2, I was seeking a context to practise repertory-grid interviews, which I had decided to use as a means for eliciting experienced teachers' constructs for my doctoral research in Turkey. I was given the opportunity at this point to interview selected participants in the Professional Practice course described above. I describe below the theoretical framework within which I was working and my research design, together with relevant findings.

Theoretical framework

George Kelly's theory of personal constructs (often referred to as 'personal construct psychology', or 'PCP') is articulated in its *fundamental postulate* as

follows: “*a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events*” (1955: 46, italics in original). ‘Construct’ is the term used by Kelly (ibid.) to refer to the way a person anticipates events and so makes sense and takes control of the world surrounding him or her. A construct can be defined in simple terms as “a way in which two or more things are alike and *thereby* different from a third or more things” (Fransella and Bannister 1977: 5, italics in original). In other words, constructs are bi-polar structures and people do not affirm something without simultaneously rejecting something else. For example, if I say “Mr. White is my boss”, I might also implicitly be saying that “Mr. White is not my enemy” or “Mr. White is not my husband.” According to Kelly, then, we construe the ‘elements’ of the world around us in a bi-polar way. Likeness and contrast are important features of constructs that must be taken into account if we are to understand how people make sense of the world.

In these respects, focusing on the elicitation of ‘constructs’ rather than the ‘knowledge’ or ‘beliefs’ which are commonly focused on by researchers, has definite advantages in providing in-depth insights into teacher, student-teacher, or, indeed, learner thinking. Pajares (1992) states that differentiating between teacher knowledge and beliefs is difficult because these terms have been used without much consideration of their meaning and application. Woods (1996: 71–72), in his discussion of teacher belief systems, states that even when beliefs are explicitly stated, they must be seen as hypotheses because they may not match what the speaker really believes, but rather may reflect what the speaker wants listeners to think, since individuals construct their beliefs according to the rules of the society they live in. As Benson and Lor (1999: 464) suggest, there is similarly value in distinguishing learners’ beliefs about learning (what they think is true about learning) from their conceptions of learning (what they perceive learning to be). The latter govern their actual learning, whereas the former may or may not do so. This corresponds with Roberts’ (1999: 122) suggestion that the usefulness of PCP applied to language teaching lies in uncovering the nature of learners’ and teachers’ personal theories about language, learning and other aspects of their educational culture. Its particular strengths lie in providing detailed representations of how learners and teachers perceive specific contexts and relationships.

Constructs, then, are the ways we actually anticipate events. We can think of them as coloured lenses. If we place blue ones in front of our eyes, we see the world in blue. If we do not know that we see the world as blue because of the lenses we are wearing, then we ‘believe’ the world is blue. However, there are alternatives and they are provisional. If we do not like the way we see the world, and are aware of alternatives, we can replace the lenses with pink or green ones. This highlights another important aspect of constructs – the way they can be altered – since ‘*all of*

our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement (Kelly 1955: 15, italics in original):

We take the stand that there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world. No one needs to paint himself into a corner; no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances; no one needs to be the victim of his biography. We call this position *constructive alternativism*. (Kelly (ibid.), italics in original)

Thus, whereas the notion of 'belief' is a somewhat static one, constructs can be seen as relatively open to change. Zeichner, Tabachnik and Densmore (1987: 28) comment that "preservice programs are not very powerful interventions" with regard to student-teachers' beliefs because these beliefs tend to remain inflexible, but Kagan (1992: 150) responds to this by saying that the assumed inflexibility of student-teachers' beliefs might be illusory; rather it might be that the training programmes in which they are engaged fail to help them to reconstruct their beliefs. Indeed, Cabaroğlu and Roberts (2000) identified change in constructs during a pre-service training course which engaged students in extensive reflection. In Kellyan terms, professional development can be enhanced by showing teachers alternative ways of anticipating events, and it is important to try to understand how student-teachers and teachers can be encouraged to experiment with different constructs.

Kelly's (1955) theory also provides as its methodological component the repertory-grid (henceforth, 'rep-grid') interview technique for investigating personal construct systems. As Pope and Keen (1981: 2) suggest, rep-grids "allow both the researcher/teacher and participant subject/learner a means of monitoring and reflecting on the idiosyncratic frames of reference which the learner evolves". Furthermore, they are a means for eliciting constructs with minimum interviewer bias, for the reason that during a rep-grid interview there are no pre-set questions to ask to the interviewee. This minimises the widely acknowledged risk of interviewer bias (Kvale 1996) by enabling the researcher to keep his/her own assumptions and constructs private to him/herself.

Research design

The interviews I shall report on were carried out with three participants in the 2002 Professional Practice course described above whom I had previously met and talked to in social situations and was therefore comfortable approaching. Although the course tutors were aware that I had asked these students to be interviewed, I guaranteed to participants that tutors would not have access to the data until after the

students had safely graduated, and then only with participants' full consent (subsequently granted) and under conditions of complete anonymity in any publication.

The overall aim of the interviews, as agreed with course tutors, was to investigate the degree of correspondence or lack of correspondence between tutor goals in the area of 'teacher-learner autonomy' and participants' own perceptions at a point near the end of the course. I also hoped to gain insights into the usefulness and difficulties of the course, as perceived by participants. Thus, the research question which guided the first, rep-grid interview was "How do participants construe the 'difficulty' and 'usefulness' of different elements of the course design?"

The general procedure of each rep-grid interview was as follows:

1. Elements discussed in the interviews were clearly identifiable activities within the course design (see Appendix for a full list), and understanding of these was carefully checked at the outset of the interview. At the time of the interview all these activities had already been experienced by participants.
2. Participants were asked to construe a triad of selected elements in terms of their usefulness or (in the second half of the interview) their difficulty.
3. They then were asked in what meaningful way two of the elements in a triad were similar and thereby different from the third element.
4. The construct thus elicited was noted down, and the procedure repeated with different triads of elements.

One week later I additionally carried out a semi-structured follow-up interview with each participant. In this interview, I asked general questions about the overall benefits and difficulties of the course for participants, how the benefits could be increased and the difficulties lessened, whether their perceptions of usefulness and difficulty had changed during the course, and what each participant's current perception of self as teacher was. I also returned to some of the constructs elicited from participants during the rep-grid interview, and attempted to 'ladder up' further (Kelly 1955) to reach core constructs by asking questions such as "In what way is it meaningful to you being [e.g.] self-directed?". Having transcribed the interviews from audio-recordings and after repeated re-reading of these transcripts, I wrote the vignettes below to represent my main findings.

Findings

All three participants interviewed in 2002 saw value in the course in ways which can be related to the goal of teacher-learner autonomy as defined in the first half of this paper. However, there were subtle variations in the three participants' perceptions, as I shall now attempt to show.

Antonia: "It was a kind of self-discovery experience"

Antonia's overall perception of herself as a teacher by the end of the course (at the time of the follow-up interview) was that she was "much better prepared to be more effective, to be more successful in relation to my students' learning and to my teaching as well", because she was now "more aware of [...] methods and ways of how to develop myself". She considered that the course had been "practical, enabling you to put into practice all the theories, discovering and improving yourself and your teaching style and learning how to manage the evaluation of improvement". As she also said of the overall benefits of the course,

The fact that we became aware of our own teaching is beneficial. It was a kind of self-discovery experience. It encourages reflection/reflective teaching. I think they are all factors that will lead to improvement, to some development of yourself in teaching in practice.

Antonia had appeared to place particular importance on "self-awareness" and (to a lesser, though still significant extent) "reflection" and "self-development" in rep-grid interviews. On this basis I asked her, during the follow-up interview, "In what way is it meaningful to you being self-aware?" She confirmed that, for her, "It is very important because it is the starting point of an improvement. When you become more aware of yourself, you recognize there is a problem and then you can investigate and overcome this problem." She acknowledged, though, that she had found it difficult at first to understand the philosophy of the course, and that the tutors' guidance had been necessary in enabling her to now feel "more self-aware, making my own decisions". Antonia referred several times to the usefulness of the particular kind of *general* "help and guidance" provided by tutors during the course, relating this to her own tendency to be dependent on teachers: "I like to be supported but they gave general support. I am used to being dependent on the teacher. I expected much more, but I see [what they gave] was more helpful for self-awareness."

A second, related construct elicited in the rep-grid interview with Antonia concerned the freedom to make one's own decisions, independently of course tutors. Thus, in discussing different course elements, she referred to the way they enabled or did not enable her to "choose what I want" or (in another case) "give me the chance to act independently of the teacher(s)". As she said in relation to one triad of elements,

The usefulness is that I choose what I want, what I am interested in, to get what I want [...] I had a focus. It's important to be more self-aware of your own problems. In the beginning I thought I was going to rely on teachers' feedback. The biggest thing I learnt from this course is making your own decisions, investigating them, reflecting and planning improvements.

However, the same construct (related to freedom of decision-making) had also been elicited when Antonia was talking about difficulties of particular course activities. When I later ‘laddered up’ (that is, attempted to ‘get to the heart of’) this construct, asking in what way it was meaningful to her as a learner to make her own decisions, Antonia replied positively, as follows:

As a learner you have to monitor your learning and make appropriate decisions of what you improve in your learning, what to prioritise from the input of the teacher. And this leads to autonomy, and awareness of your learning and to intrinsic motivation which will definitely lead to better learning if all these things are done.

It turned out, however, that the “prioritising” mentioned both here and frequently at other points in the two interviews was particularly difficult for Antonia. When I laddered up this third construct (prioritising as opposed to not prioritising), she claimed that “it’s very important you have a clear idea of what to prioritise because this is linked to decision-making. It is important because it helps you to do something more thoroughly, deeper.” But this was not always an easy process:

It was [sometimes] difficult to see the improvements made. You needed some more guidance, somebody to tell you that this is a good thing [about your teaching]. Because there were many bad things I saw everything in black. I couldn’t see the good things. It was hard to have the will to go on researching.

As she also put it, “We can only see [our] main weaknesses if we are good at targeting.”

Antonia, then, conceived of the learning benefits and difficulties of the course in terms relating especially to the development of self-awareness and an ability to manage self-improvement, freedom of decision-making and the need to prioritise.

Beth: “I can research, and find out help from various sources”

Beth, the second interviewee, volunteered the idea that she “became more autonomous as a result of this course. I can do my own self-evaluation and try to improve myself in the future.” Similarly to Antonia, Beth stated that

there was guidance [from tutors], but we did everything ourselves. We read the books, we did the research. They were there to provide support and to clarify the things that we did not understand. They offered us choices. They never told us “you should do this, you should do that activity.” We chose the activities that we liked doing.

While Antonia emphasized that for her the principal outcome of the course was heightened self-awareness, Beth seemed to place particular value on the way it had enabled her to construct her own knowledge of teaching through collaboration with peers as well as support and guidance from tutors. This related to her original

motivation for undertaking the MA programme: "My aim was to gain knowledge and ideas about teaching as much as possible when I came here. The course offered me exactly this." She noted both that "we [students] mingled with each other in class more than we used to; we were not this close before; we learned each other's ideas" and that the "tutors' guidance and demonstration were very helpful". Beth's constructs in this area included "I produce/contribute with my own knowledge" as opposed to "I have other people." As she explained, "Producing something oneself is more useful", but this was counterbalanced for her by the difficulty of doing so. Related constructs, this time elicited when Beth was discussing the difficulties of the course, were: "I have to contribute for myself" (seen as difficult) as opposed to "I don't have to produce" (less difficult), and "I have to understand individually/using my own capacity" (difficult) as opposed to "I can consult others" (less difficult).

As in the case of Antonia, it is clear that Beth valued highly the opportunity to decide for herself on areas for self-improvement, although in her case the contributions of peer and tutor support within this process were more consistently referred to. For example, in discussing the three elements of 'Transcribing my lesson' (7), 'Discussing my work/problems with tutors' (8) and 'Identifying points for improvement and investigation' (9), she remarked that

(7) and (8) are less useful, [although] they *are* useful because they help you to decide for yourself. (9) is more useful. Eventually I make my own decision. I say "I am going to improve these points." As a result of (7) and (8) you decide for yourself about which points to improve. It is more useful to decide for myself because it is going to determine the development of my next step.

When I 'laddered up' her construct relating to independent decision-making, Beth replied that:

It is meaningful to be able to develop myself as a teacher in the following years, to discover my problems and to look for the solutions to them. You have to be self-directed and know your context yourself more than anyone else. *Then you can ask other people's help*, if you know yourself. Also, you can always learn new things while looking for a solution to a problem" [emphasis added].

Christophe: "You need to have a goal, be independent, self-directed"

Christophe gave the impression of someone who was already very independent and focused as a learner when he started the course. Like both Antonia and Beth, he acknowledged its benefits, but while they conceived of these in terms of the development of self-awareness and ability to manage self-improvement or the ability to construct one's own knowledge, respectively, for Christophe it was much more a question of leaving behind an initial assumption that the course would not be useful (due to the difference between peer-teaching and 'real teaching' back home), and moving to an acceptance that he was learning new skills as a

teacher-researcher: “I now know that the principle is that you learn something new. You try out the ability to do [...] classroom research.” Indeed, his perception of self as teacher seems to have changed quite dramatically. From seeing himself “as the one who teaches language. Very simple: as you can speak [English], you can teach”, he began to see teaching as “more complicated” and came to identify himself firmly as a “teacher as a researcher”:

I [now] see myself as a teacher as a researcher. How you think effectively is important and you have to understand the mentality of the students more than before. Teacher as a researcher... You can be a teacher for one year. No problem. For twenty to thirty years it will be boring. It has to be meaningful to you. It [being a “teacher as a researcher”] makes your teaching relate to yourself and be more interesting. Also, to change for students’ good learning we must research. We teach for students.

For Christophe, even more so than for Antonia and Beth, being self-directed and making decisions for one’s own self-improvement was perceived as important:

You learn to be self-directed, which is important for you. It is important because it relates to your self-development directly. If you’re a professional who has the habit of reflecting on your own practice to improve yourself, then you’re stronger and you develop more.

Christophe had a clear picture in mind of his future teaching context, and of the difficulties as well as benefits of engaging in ongoing self-development in that context. Thus, in response to my question “In what way is it meaningful to you being self-directed?,” he replied:

Then you can handle long years of teaching successfully, meaningfully to students’ learning. It is useful in circumstances where it is unfavourable to innovation, indifferent to the teachers, no group collaboration (there can be other people tired of teaching). You need to have a goal, be independent, self-directed. It’s a big classroom. Many students are facing you. They need to be taught! You’ll be in a very passive situation if you’re not [self-directed]. Students do not like people very passive. They like to have enthusiastic teachers who show enthusiasm for teaching and students.

Unlike Beth’s, Christophe’s conception of self-directed teacher-learning was, on the surface, quite an individualistic one. Thus, in relation to the usefulness of one course element (‘reading about my area of investigation’), he volunteered the following comments: “It can be done by the individual. You don’t need a partner. You can always do it yourself. It is very useful to be [for being?] self-directed.” He contrasted this with ‘Discussing my work/problems with classmates’ and ‘Observing [other] teachers’ lessons’, where “Always you need someone. If this does not exist, you lose

your source of help. You cannot be dependent on this.” Christophe’s comments relating to the usefulness of different triads of elements often resolved themselves into distinctions between “dependence” (whether on the tutors, classmates or other resources) and (more useful) “independence”, and this was clearly a core construct for him. However, it is possible that Christophe’s apparent individualism was due to his clear focus on his future teaching context, where, as we have seen, he predicted he would be very much on his own, without access to the kinds of support available during the course itself. It is in this sense, perhaps, and in relation to his conception of his new-found vocation of “teacher as a researcher” that he assumed “It’s always good to be prepared to work alone.” Somewhat like Beth, also, he anticipated that “People will help you if you have done a lot of work yourself.”

While Christophe clearly conceived of making decisions for himself as useful, this also constituted one of two major sources of relative difficulty, or “challenge” for him. The other source of challenge frequently mentioned by him during the rep-grid interview was “finding a focus” or “being selective”. This was strongly reminiscent of Antonia’s comments on the difficulties of “prioritising”.

Overall discussion and conclusions

The first half of this paper argued for the goal within teacher education of ‘teacher-learner autonomy’ (that is, the kind of autonomy which might be exercised by teachers or student-teachers in relation to their professional development). In the second half of the paper, the value or otherwise of this notion was explored in relation to student-teachers’ own perspectives, in the context of a course which deliberately set out to promote the “ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others”.

The overall ‘construct validity’ of the notion of teacher-learner autonomy seems to have been confirmed by the interview findings reported above. The presentation of findings is admittedly selective in that those statements by participants which appeared to be related to the area of teacher-learner autonomy, as pre-defined in the first part of the paper, were particularly focused upon in the vignettes. However, all three participants volunteered various statements (without being asked leading questions) which revealed that the development of a capacity to self-direct their own teacher-learning was a salient notion for them. Further than this, even, they all – in different ways and with qualifications which will be discussed below – revealed that the development of their capacities in this area had *value* for them (thus confirming findings across the whole cohort which were derived from repeated reflective writing and questionnaires, as reported in Smith 2006).

'Teacher-learner autonomy' is, however, a theoretical construct, and the three participants – naturally enough – did not use this term itself. Indeed, rep-grid interviews were of great use in revealing the ways these participants construed their own development in different ways, and *in their own terms* (cf. Benson, this volume). Antonia particularly valued the development of her *self-awareness* as a teacher and the way this contributed to her ability to manage self-improvement; Beth highlighted the way she was developing an ability to *produce something herself* in collaboration with others; and Christophe emphasised the importance of learning to *make one's own decisions* independently, as a "teacher as a researcher". If this research has confirmed that 'teacher-learner autonomy' is valid and potentially valuable as a general theoretical notion, the 'flesh' placed on it by the statements of just these three participants indicates, also, a need to confront complexity. Complexity is apparent not only in the highly individual ways participants might find value in a pedagogy for teacher-learner autonomy but also in the difficulties they experience and the ways these, too, are related to their individual construct systems. It is interesting in this respect that the difficulties highlighted by these participants were so related to the particular benefits they also emphasised: *prioritising* when one becomes self-aware in Antonia's case, for example; *producing something oneself* for Beth; and *making decisions* for Christophe.

Thus, although an apparent overall congruence between the overall goal of the course and these participants' developing perceptions has been highlighted above, the research study also provided insights into the very individual nature of the difficulties student-teachers experience in the context of a 'pedagogy for teacher-learner autonomy' (and the same is likely to be true of learners engaged in other forms of self-directed activity, including language learning). The course tutors in this particular context are aware of such difficulties in broad terms (see Smith et al. 2003, Smith 2006, Brown, Smith and Ushioda 2007), and have developed ways of providing targeted, and, to a degree, individualized support, as was commented on favourably in some of the vignettes above. As these also imply, however, it seems likely that only the 'tip of the iceberg' of student difficulties (and achievements) can be seen by teacher educators, teachers and learning counsellors in the normal course of their work, however much they may attempt to elicit student perspectives and provide targeted support.

This brings us to some suggestions regarding directions for further inquiry, and appropriate research design. As Benson (2001) has indicated, in the field of learner autonomy there appear to be particular needs for research into the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches, and for research-based accounts of teacher education programmes which aim to develop teacher autonomy, or the capacity to promote learner autonomy (as indicated earlier, the two are not necessarily the same thing). But the question still remains: how can learning counsel-

lors, teachers and teacher educators evaluate their practices in a flexible and learner-centred manner, moving beyond their own preconceptions to access learners' developing perspectives? In relation to this question, concerns might be expressed about the relatively blunt nature of typical research instruments, given the requirements autonomy practitioners may wish to establish for differentiating among individual learners and for taking account of unpredicted learning outcomes. In this connection, we would like to highlight the potential wider value of rep-grid and follow-up interviews. Rep-grid interviews undertaken by a 'semi-outsider' researcher with just three course participants generated, in our case, rich insights which would otherwise have been unavailable to the course tutors. Although such interviews can be time-consuming and require prior (self-)training, they seem to have a potential wider value for investigating language learner autonomy in an in-depth fashion, from learners' own perspectives and with minimum interviewer bias. Additionally, there are various statistical techniques (not engaged in here) which can be applied to data from repeated rep-grid interviews, and which can potentially enable researchers, teachers and counsellors to track and evaluate *change* in learners' (or, in this case, teacher-learners') constructs. In future research we hope it will be possible to look more carefully at change in constructs over time, asking participants for their collaboration in confirming and reflecting upon 'construct maps' elicited at different points (cf. Sendan 1995), with potential additional benefit to themselves.

Finally, with regard to implications for appropriate course design, the interview findings discussed above confirm that self-directed activity needs to be balanced with effective support (as valued highly by two of the three participants). There may be diverse individual concerns in the minds of student-teachers which are not catered for in teacher educators' perceptions, but which need to be taken into account in the transition to greater autonomy. Efforts need to be continuously made to bridge gaps between 'theoretical' course goals and – on the basis of ongoing investigation – student-teachers' own, individually varied constructs.

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Appendix: Rep-grid interview elements

1. Planning my lesson
2. Teaching my lesson
3. Reading students' feedback
4. Discussing my work/problems with classmates
5. Observing [other] teachers' lessons
6. Reading about my area for investigation
7. Transcribing my lesson
8. Discussing my work/problems with tutors
9. Identifying points for improvement and investigation
10. Hearing from tutors (in class) about teaching/classroom research
11. Writing my lesson plan rationale (Part A of the draft)
12. Writing my lesson report (Part B of the draft)