



Teacher education for learner autonomy: building a knowledge base

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To cite this article: Richard Smith & Flávia Vieira (2009) Teacher education for learner autonomy: building a knowledge base , , 3:3, 215-220, DOI: [10.1080/17501220903404434](https://doi.org/10.1080/17501220903404434)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501220903404434>



Published online: 27 Nov 2009.



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EDITORIAL

Teacher education for learner autonomy: building a knowledge base

The articles collected in this thematic issue of *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* were first presented in a symposium with the above title which was organised and chaired by Richard Smith at the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (AILA) World Congress in August 2008, in Essen, Germany. The aim of the symposium was to offer an opportunity for interested researchers and/or teacher educators to collaborate towards the development of a knowledge base for teacher education for learner autonomy (henceforth, TELA), synthesising and extending recent debates and research work in the field.

Over the last decade, the pursuit of learner autonomy has become an ideal to which many in the world of language teaching adhere. Indeed, as the notion has become integrated in official discourses and more and more associated with classroom teaching (and not just self-access or distance learning), the role of the teacher in promoting learner autonomy has increasingly been seen as central. Nevertheless, as Jiménez Raya and Vieira (2008) conclude on the basis of a survey of relatively large-scale teacher education projects devoted to the promotion of learner autonomy in European schools, research into TELA has been scarce. This situation appears to have changed little since Benson (2001) indicated that there are pressing needs for research-based accounts of teacher education programmes which aim to develop teacher autonomy and/or the capacity to promote learner autonomy.

The notion of ‘teacher autonomy’ has been advanced as one prerequisite for the promotion of learner autonomy but it seems likely that there are additional, relatively neglected factors which can contribute to the promotion of learner autonomy with students. The central and topical problem – What particular competences and conditions are required for teachers to promote learner autonomy? – was intended as one of the foci of the symposium, which aimed partly to identify ‘content’ aspects of a knowledge base for TELA from experience and research-based perspectives.

In the area of practice, while the need for parallelism between pedagogy for (pupils’) autonomy and teacher education practices has often been emphasised, there has still not been much research devoted to characterising appropriate forms of teacher education intervention or teacher development structure for encouraging student-teachers or practising teachers to promote learner autonomy. The problem of ‘What kinds of process should TELA involve?’ was also an intended focus of the symposium, which thereby encouraged evaluation of and theorisation from existing innovative practice.

Overall questions which informed the symposium as a whole included: ‘Can there be a knowledge base for TELA?’ and ‘What do we still need to know?’ Participants were also invited to reflect on some more specific questions/issues prepared by Flávia Vieira in framing their presentations and written papers, considering those they found most relevant in their case. The questions were intended to provide a *common reference* for the symposium and this publication, based on the idea that our aim has been to

‘collaborate towards the development of a knowledge base for teacher education for learner autonomy (TELA), synthesising and extending recent debates and research work in the field’ (symposium abstract). Readers might similarly find these questions useful for reflecting on some of the issues raised by this focus on TELA.

A. TELA (teacher education for learner autonomy)

- Why/what for should we focus on TELA? What are the historical and structural circumstances (conceptual, ideological, economical, practical) that seem to foster or hamper it?
- Where does TELA occur? What formal and non-formal contexts can support its development? Is TELA in formal settings (e.g. pre-service and in-service courses) a necessary condition for the development of pedagogy for autonomy in schools?
- Why is it that TELA and research into TELA have been relatively scarce in many contexts, despite the fact that learner autonomy has become a fundamental curriculum principle? Does that ‘lack’ mean that teachers have not been concerned with learner autonomy in schools? Is it possible that our picture of what is going on in schools is detached from reality simply because we do not know much about it?
- What visions of (language) education and (language) teacher education underlie current understandings and practices of TELA (including our own)?
- Do we see any connection between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy? Do we see them as interdependent, parallel or independent phenomena? In what ways?
- How do different understandings of the connection between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy determine the way TELA might develop?
- How does our role in the educational arena and our professional histories (as researchers and/or teacher educators) affect the way we tackle the above issues?

B. Building a knowledge base for TELA

- What do we mean by a *knowledge base for TELA*? Why should we need one?
- What kinds of knowledge do we have in mind? How do we build it? Who builds it? For what purposes and in whose interests?
- Do we see TELA as a disciplinary or a cross-disciplinary issue? How do these two different stances influence the notion of a knowledge base for TELA?
- Can the ‘content’ aspects of a knowledge base for TELA be understood as ‘the competences and conditions required for teachers to promote learner autonomy’? If so, how do we define those contents? If not, what would those contents be?
- Can we separate the definition of competences and conditions required for teachers to promote learner autonomy from the contexts and practices of TELA? In other words, can any theoretical base for TELA be reached on the margin of local educational cultures and processes, including the participants’ biographies, personal theories, expectations, etc.?

- What has been/might be the role of teachers, students, teacher educators, researchers, curriculum designers, managers and policy-makers in building a knowledge base for TELA? What voices have been/might be heard? Who has told/ might tell trustworthy stories of TELA? What makes a story of TELA trustworthy?
- What teacher education and/or research approaches have been/might be useful to gain a deep understanding of what TELA involves/might involve?
- Can isolated cases of TELA produce knowledge that can be built upon by the educational community? Can/should local knowledge become more collective?
- Can/should we aim at defining a *unified* knowledge base for TELA? Why/not? What gains, shortcomings and risks are involved?
- How does our role in the educational arena and our professional histories (as researchers and/or teacher educators) affect the way we tackle the above issues?

Overall, the articles in this journal issue tackle these questions by describing local cases of teacher education practice and research, examining their assumptions and outcomes, discussing their contribution to the construction of a knowledge base for TELA, and interrogating the notion of a ‘knowledge base’ itself.

In the first article of this collection – ‘Teacher education for learner autonomy: an analysis of the EuroPAL contribution to a knowledge base’ – Manuel Jiménez Raya (Universidad de Granada, Spain) critically discusses the notion of a knowledge base for teaching and teacher education. He argues that the definition and organisation of a professional knowledge base continues to be one of the major challenges that the profession faces, but the legitimacy of defining essential knowledge in teaching can be contested since an appropriate definition of teaching is highly dependent on the ends regarded as desirable – a matter of judgement, not of science – and also on the context where teaching takes place. In the case of TELA, even if it were possible to reach agreed understandings on the essential knowledge and skills it involves, these understandings would almost certainly not apply in all situations, given the variations in schools, pupils, teachers, resources, and administrative leadership. What seems to be required, the author argues, are alternative patterns or frameworks for organising a professional knowledge base. An example of such an alternative pattern or framework may be that which underlies the SOCRATES-funded A European Pedagogy for Autonomous Learning (EuroPAL) project, which is discussed in this article. EuroPAL focused on TELA in modern language teaching pedagogy in schools, and the project team produced a conceptual and ethical framework for learner and teacher development, as well as materials which adopt a case-based approach to TELA. The author presents and analyses the work undertaken in EuroPAL as a possible contribution to a critical, teacher-centred, and context-sensitive knowledge base, which will have to be verified and improved by practitioners on a continuous basis.

In ‘Educating for learner-centredness in Chinese pre-service teacher education’, Qiang Wang and Xin Ma (Beijing Normal University, China) start from the assumption that recent reform in basic education in China, with learner-centredness as an underlying principle, has not translated into innovations in teacher education programmes, with most new entrants to the profession lacking awareness of what is going on in schools and of what learner-centred pedagogies involve. The authors argue that making teacher education programmes more student-centred is necessary

so as to enhance the introduction of learner-centred pedagogies in schools while nurturing autonomy in student teachers themselves. They report extensively on innovations introduced within a pre-service English language teacher education module in a leading teacher education institution in China, with a group of 110 student teachers as participants. Students experienced a learner-centred approach as participants and were encouraged to critically examine their assumptions about teaching and learning on this basis. A positive learning culture was created both in and outside class for student teachers to share their views, raise questions, and discuss issues of common concern with an open mind. Data collected over a period of six months through questionnaires, reflections shared in the blogging space, focus group interviews, and post-course and post-practicum reflections suggest that the innovations introduced have had a strong impact on student teachers' views about teaching and learning, enhancing a positive attitude towards teaching as a profession, increasing awareness of and confidence with learner-centred pedagogies, and developing capabilities to promote learner autonomy in their future teaching. The authors observed an evolution from rational to attitudinal and behavioural change, which suggests that teacher development in this context progresses from 'knowing' to 'understanding' and 'personalising'. Implications are drawn regarding the construction of a knowledge base for TELA, with a particular emphasis on the need to foster personal understandings of teaching and to mediate between learner-centred principles and practical school contexts.

Maria Alfredo Moreira (University of Minho, Portugal) writes about 'Action research as a tool for critical teacher education towards learner autonomy', drawing on the experience of a team of supervisors at the University of Minho, who since 1995 have systematically promoted and evaluated action research as a supervisory strategy towards pedagogy for autonomy, with student teachers of English and German in their *practicum*. Some of the theoretical underpinnings of action research and learner autonomy are set against the results of that experience. Ongoing evaluation based on teacher reflective records and teachers' and pupils' feedback through questionnaires suggests that action research as a means to enhance teacher reflectivity and emancipation through collaborative inquiry into educational action has been a powerful tool for engaging student teachers in the critical analysis of pedagogical action towards learner autonomy. Being a participatory, teacher-centred approach to both pedagogy and research, action research articulates both teacher and learner development when carried out within a critical approach to education where contexts are conceived as a setting for both personal and social transformation. Inquiry and change are crucial within this framework. Inquiry about the contexts of teaching and learning improves teachers' awareness of situational constraints, tensions and dilemmas, and helps them understand and cope with the problematic nature of professional situations. Change is brought about by the process of knowledge construction that increases teachers' critical awareness of the practical, political and ethical nature of their work, and engages them in transformative action. The fact that this project is evaluated on the basis of the participants' views and actions *in context* suggests that a knowledge base for TELA must be local, even though it is guided by broad educational assumptions and principles.

In the final article of the collection, 'Enhancing pedagogy for autonomy through learning communities: making our dream come true?' Flávia Vieira (University of Minho, Portugal) contends that the pedagogy for autonomy dream will only come true when it becomes *teachers'* dream, which means that unless they play a leading

role in the construction of a knowledge base for the promotion of learner autonomy, opportunities for transforming school pedagogy will be missed. She argues that academic researchers and teacher educators should be working together with teachers in a democratic, supportive environment. The possibility she explores is the constitution of university–school networks that may grow into learning communities where (inter)personal development is directly linked to the definition of common goals, allowing for diversity to flourish. One of the major implications of this route is that autonomy becomes a collective interest, and therefore a collective dream, taking various forms depending on contexts of practice. The author draws on the story of the Grupo de Trabalho-Pedagogia para a Autonomia/Working Group-Pedagogy for Autonomy (GT-PA), which she has coordinated since 1997, a multidisciplinary community of teachers and academic researchers/teacher educators who have struggled to enhance pedagogy for autonomy in schools. She describes its characteristics, achievements, and constraints, using this case as an illustration of how learning communities can build knowledge *bases* for the enhancement of teacher and learner autonomy in (language) education.

Although it is not our purpose here to offer an overriding analysis of the contributions to this journal issue, we would say that they all seem to quite clearly reject a top-down, technicist, positivist approach to knowledge as regards TELA. The tension between the need to find common ground *and* the complex, unique nature of teaching and teacher education is not resolved, and we might even suggest that perhaps it *cannot* and *should not* be resolved unless we seek to produce ‘a timeless body of truth’ about how teachers and teacher educators should experience education:

The technicist, positivist tradition of producing knowledge – from which contemporary top-down standards emerge – seeks to provide a timeless body of truth. This so-called ‘formal knowledge’ is not only unconnected to the world but separate from issues of commitment, emotion, values, and ethical action. The objectivity inscribed in formal knowledge often becomes a signifier for political passivity and elevation to an elite sociopolitical and economic location. Thus, in its lofty position, positivistic formalism refuses to analyze the relationship between knowledge production and educational practices. (Kincheloe 2003, 7–8)

As Kincheloe suggests, ‘what we refer to as knowledge is problematic. Human knowledge, knowledge about humans, and knowledge derived from research about human education are constituted by a variety of forces’ (91). In the field of TELA, these forces can take various forms – from macro educational policies and their relation to broader social, economical and cultural scenarios to the micro-politics in educational contexts – and operate in direct or subtle ways to determine how knowledge is produced and distributed, by whom and in whose interests, and what counts as legitimate knowledge.

It is certainly important to know what teachers need to know, understand the sources and diversity of teacher knowledge, and acknowledge ‘the wisdom of practice’ that Shulman – whose work in this field is probably the best known – so eloquently emphasises (see Shulman 2004). However, the problem is that what we know about teacher knowledge cannot be separate from questions of who builds that knowledge, how and for what purpose. Because epistemologies underlying research and practice in the fields of teaching and teacher education determine what is known, we should perhaps interrogate those epistemologies in order to better understand

what we mean by ‘building a knowledge base for TELA.’ This entails a critical examination of how TELA is carried out and studied in different contexts by different people. None of the articles presented here is intended to undertake such a meta-analytical overview, but they surely offer cases that can be scrutinised with that purpose in mind, and the set of questions/issues presented above might provide a framework to do that. We thus invite readers to go through the articles with a critical eye, compare them with one another and with other cases they know about or are involved in, perhaps consider the possibility that we might start thinking about knowledge *bases*, and scrutinise these cases for their potential and limitations, rather than seeking in them a universal basis for teacher education towards learner autonomy in schools. Going back to Kincheloe (2003, 145), ‘the price of our abandonment of the quest for certainty is untidy diversity, but the world itself (especially the social and educational world) is not at all that neat.’

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