

# Teacher Autonomy and Learner Autonomy: An East Asian's Perspective

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**Abstract**—This paper describes a proposal for a study on autonomy in language learning to be carried out with students and English teachers at a Vietnamese university. It focuses on teachers' views of the concept of teacher autonomy and its relationship to learner autonomy. In the East Asian context, the idea of teacher autonomy, seen by many as a key approach to promoting learner autonomy, is relatively unfamiliar and thus little investigated. The paper will conclude with implications for professional development for language teachers in the East Asian region.

**Index Terms**—East asian context, learner autonomy, professional teacher development, teacher autonomy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The central issue considered in this paper is how East Asian teachers understand the term teacher autonomy (TA), and its role in developing learner autonomy (LA). Research has shown that in order to increase the students' independence and interest in learning, teachers should possess the capacity for autonomy (Little, 1991). However, careful consideration should be given to how to effectively apply TA, a Western concept, within the context of East Asia. Here, students are accustomed to a teacher-centered approach. They may interpret teachers' attempts to encourage self-directed learning mode as abandoning the responsibilities of being a 'good' teacher.

The proposed study will include two interview stages and an intervention to investigate to what extent teachers' perspective of TA equates with their classroom practice. The intervention will consist of a language project during which both teachers and students will have input into its design and evaluation. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to the development of professional autonomy in East Asian countries.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Teacher Autonomy

TA was defined by Little (1995) as the capacity of teachers to engage in self-directed teaching. Other researchers have conceptualized TA as teachers' ability to develop appropriate

skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Smith, 2000); and as "a teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning" (Thavenius, 1999, p. 160). Thavenius differs from both Little and Smith in conceptualising the relationship between TA and LA (which will be discussed in more detail in the following section). According to Thavenius, TA and LA happen simultaneously and reinforce each other because in order to promote LA, it is necessary for teachers to work autonomously with learners' learning processes.

According to Barfield et al (2001) negotiation skills are the first and most important element of TA. Besides, language teachers are required to explore opportunities to improve their teaching effectiveness. In other words, it is necessary to equip teachers with language teaching methodologies so as to develop students' autonomous learning in their specific context.

In analyzing the characteristics of TA, Smith (2001, p. 5) offered a set of six characteristics: (1) Self-directed professional action, (2) Capacity for self-directed professional action, (3) Freedom from control over professional action, (4) Self-directed professional development (5) Capacity for self-directed professional development, (6) Freedom from control over professional development. Yan (2010) mostly agreed with Smith's (2001) summary, but pointed out that there is another crucial element in TA, namely, teachers' attitudes. Yan then divided TA into three dimensions: capacity and freedom in knowledge, skills and attitudes.

In order to develop TA, according to Tort-Moloney (1997), teachers must "become autonomous regarding curricular demands, pedagogical material and discourses, as well as in research, by being able to acknowledge the virtues and limitations of these areas" (Tort-Moloney, 1997, p. 50). The following section will present the specific link between TA and LA.

### B. Teacher Autonomy and Learner Autonomy

Language teachers have a crucial role in developing autonomy in their learners. The primary reason for this is that TA – the teacher's decisions and work activities – is defined by the teacher's role in the classroom setting (Samuels, 1970).

The teacher's behaviour has an important influence on learners' beliefs in language learning (Cotterall, 1995). Actions that students assign to the teacher, such as diagnosing difficulties, allocating time, establishing the purpose of activities – are central to the behaviour of autonomous learners. Cotterall concluded her study by stating that those learners who view teacher as counsellors and facilitators of learning are ready for autonomy. In

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developing LA, it is suggested that teachers should facilitate learners "to set personal goals, monitor and reflect on their performance, and modify their learning behavior accordingly" (Cotterall, 2000, p. 116). Similarly, Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) stated that there are two crucial aspects of teaching which foster LA: the teacher's own autonomy and a set of teaching skills relevant to developing autonomy. They emphasized that the language course is the most likely context for learners to come into contact with the idea of autonomy and develop appropriate skills. The classroom teacher is therefore likely to have a major impact on students' development towards autonomy, and Lamb's (2009) research pointed out that learners can be taught specific techniques to help them feel in control (Lamb, 2009).

To sum up, TA and LA are closely connected. "It is teachers' autonomy to cultivate a good environment for learners so that learners may acquire and practice the knowledge autonomously" (Yan, 2010). However, Benson (2007) questioned whether greater LA leads to higher effectiveness in language learning. This issue will be discussed in the next section.

### *C. Learner Autonomy and Language Acquisition*

It is widely held that autonomous habits of learning lead to more successful language acquisition, for the following reasons. Firstly, autonomous language learners as specified by Dam (1995), are those who have abilities to independently define aims and purposes and set goals for themselves; they also have the ability to choose materials, methods and tasks, know how to organize their choices and choose criteria for evaluation. In order to possess such abilities, learners need to be aware of different learning strategies (Wenden, 1987). Therefore, teaching learning strategies helps students to consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated, and independent. In other words, learning strategies enable students to take more responsibility for their own language learning, which will lead to more effective language acquisition (Macaro, 2001).

In short, appropriate use of learning strategies will enable learners to take responsibility for their own learning by enhancing LA, independence, and self – direction (Oxford and Nykio, 1989 cited Dickinson, 1987 and Holec, 1981). The implication is that appropriate strategy use will enhance the language acquisition process. However, it is argued that cultural constraints may have an effect on strategy development; therefore, a specific setting should be investigated. I would like now to review how LA is interpreted in East Asian context.

### *D. Learner Autonomy in the East Asian Context*

It should not be assumed that LA is totally absent in the East Asian context. According to Littlewood (1999), East Asian learners possess reactive autonomy while Western learners have proactive autonomy. The former regulates the activity once the direction has been set. Learners are stimulated to learn vocabulary without being pushed, to do past examination papers on their own initiative, or to organize themselves into groups in order to cover the reading for an assignment. Proactive autonomy regulates the direction of the activity and its performance attributes.

Learners are able to take charge of their own learning, determine objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired. East Asian learners can also be said to be autonomous in three dimensions - learning management, cognitive process, and learning content. East Asian learners value formal and teacher-led learning (Littlewood, 1999). They view teachers as having much higher status and always expect to complete what teachers set for their learning and accept their evaluation.

In promoting the Western idea of autonomy in Asian settings therefore, the cultural background of learners is often viewed as an obstacle (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). Trinh (2005) concluded that "Asian learners are not un-autonomous by nature ... The educational systems in Asian contexts should provide students with more room to get involved in their learning ... Learner autonomy can be stimulated in non-Western contexts" (Trinh, 2005, p.25). Teachers are advised to have discussions about students' learning situations and their individual autonomous differences (Littlewood, 1999). Thus, a key factor in developing strategies for increasing LA is to study which forms of LA best suit the learners and how compatible these strategies are with learners' own beliefs, preferences and expectations (Littlewood, 2010).

As stated by Barfield et al (2001) and Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) in the previous sections, teachers' own autonomy and a set of teaching skills relevant to the teaching context are two crucial aspects of teaching which foster LA. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how TA is interpreted in East Asia so as to propose suitable teaching methodologies to develop student autonomous learning. It is hoped that the proposed study below will shed light on this issue.

## III. THE STUDY

### *A. Research Question*

The study will be conducted in order to answer the following question:

How do Vietnamese teachers understand the concept of teacher autonomy in tertiary English education?

### *B. Setting and Participants*

The researcher plans to carry out a case study at a Vietnamese private university, specifically in the tourism department. The main reason for this option is the experience of the researcher herself in teaching English for students of tourism. The second reason is that tourism is a key industry in Vietnam. Tourist guide majors, therefore, are prominently placed in any consideration of enhancing English education. Three English teachers of this subject area will participate, to be selected on a voluntary basis.

### *C. Research Process and Procedure*

#### Phase I: Interview

The interview with teachers (in English) will be in two parts, and last for approximately forty minutes. After asking teachers about their current understanding of TA, there will be questions on what teaching techniques they employ to foster their students' autonomous learning.

#### Phase 2: Intervention – A language project

The intervention will be a language project within the existing curriculum of the university in which both teachers and students will participate in the design and evaluation. Research has shown that one of the best ways of developing LA is to assign project work, which will encourage learners to “approach learning in their own way, suitable to their own abilities, styles and preferences” (Skehan, 1998, p.23). Project work, as defined by Fried-Booth (2002, p. 6), is “student-centred and driven by the need to create an end-product”, which “brings opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence and to work together in a real world environment by collaborating on a task which they have defined for themselves and which has not been externally imposed”.

Before the project is undertaken, there will be a preliminary session with teachers to plan how to conduct the project. The focus of the session is:

- Teacher and students negotiation on the topic
- Determination on the final outcome
- Analysing a model video to prepare for language and layout of the final performance
- Evaluation criteria
- Controlling the students' evaluation session

This project will involve students researching a particular place of tourism interest. Then each group of students will give an oral presentation to guide “travelers” about the place. The project can also provide cross-curricular links with their history and geography studies. The timeframe for the project will be as follows:

- Week 1 – 2 : Generating ideas
- Week 3 : Planning
- Week 4 – 8 : Implementation
- Week 9 – 10: Evaluation and reflection

#### Phase 3: Interview

Interviews will be carried out individually with these three teachers focusing on any changes to their perceptions of TA after the project.

#### D. Data Generation and Analysis

##### Interview (phase 1 and 3):

The interviews will be arranged at a room on the university campus at the participants' convenience and will be audio recorded. The data will then be typed into text for a careful qualitative theme analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). All these transcripts will finally be segmented and coded. NVivo, a useful tool, will be applied to manage these qualitative data.

##### Observation (phase 2):

Three class observation sessions will be video-recorded in phase 2, when the language project work takes place. The first session will be when the teacher gives instructions for their students of how to conduct their work. The second will focus on what the learners do after instruction, and how the teachers may facilitate ongoing project development. The third will focus on evaluation and assessment. The purpose of this is to match teachers' perceptions and recall in the second interview against actual observed events.

##### Intervention (phase 2):

Before the teachers and the students conduct their project

work, there will be an orientation by the researcher with the teachers. The researcher will give guidelines and model the project work first. Then there will be consultation with the teachers in order to conduct the work effectively. The researcher will collect their ideas on the final design.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has described a study which will be undertaken to explore the understanding of TA in a very specific setting, tertiary English education in Vietnam. Language project work has been chosen for its appropriateness in fostering both teacher and learner autonomy; the teachers will prepare students for language demands they meet when gathering information, compiling and analysing data, and presenting their final product. It is expected that the emergence of TA and LA will be apparent during the initial negotiation process between teacher and students on the theme, the outcome, and the structure of the project.

Through this process of negotiation “learners can be brought to accept responsibility ... The basis of this negotiation must be a recognition that in the pedagogical process teachers as well as students can learn, and students as well as teachers can teach” (Little, 1995, pp. 178-180). Negotiation skills are therefore an important element of TA, and in order to develop successful classroom negotiation skills, one of the major prerequisites must be teacher professional development (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000).

It is expected that the findings of the study will reveal aspects of effective pedagogic intervention that promote autonomy for both teachers and students in East Asia in general and Vietnam in particular. Given that the goal of Vietnamese tertiary education is to develop more effective communication in English, this will be a highly relevant and timely study.

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