

Teacher Autonomy: Perceptions and Practices

Mehnaz Tazeen Choudhury, Central Women's University, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Foreign language learners cannot acquire a language successfully unless they are able to attain a certain level of autonomy in learning. Learning to learn autonomously is, therefore, a skill that all language teachers must develop in their students, because learners do not come to class with an innate knowledge of how to learn autonomously. Research has shown that teachers who are themselves autonomous are more autonomy supportive than those who feel constrained and controlled in their teaching environment. It is understood that tertiary level teachers enjoy more autonomy than teachers of other levels of education, and they are more likely to put the responsibility of learning on their students, because university education requires students to work on their own. Keeping this in mind, this study investigated tertiary level language teachers' perception of the concept of autonomy, and sought to find out whether their classroom practices were autonomy supportive. Another aim of the study was to see what kind of strategies, if any, teachers were using to foster learner autonomy. This was a qualitative research and the participants were six language teachers who taught foundation level language courses at three private universities in Dhaka. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires were used as tools to gain insights into teacher beliefs and practices. The findings of the research have implications for teacher training programmes which focus on raising awareness about teacher beliefs and practices.

Keywords: teacher autonomy, classroom practices, teacher beliefs

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Introduction

In Bangladesh the educational climate at schools and intermediate levels is as yet quite traditional, where the age old Grammar Translation Method is used for teaching English. The method, as it is applied in our country, not only serves to make our students teacher dependent but it deprives students of the ability to think creatively. When these students reach tertiary level, it becomes necessary for them to take the onus of their learning on themselves, and rote learning is not an option anymore. It falls upon the tertiary level language teacher to wean them of their earlier language learning habits (if it can be called that) and introduce them to a whole new style of autonomous learning, which is the key to gaining language proficiency. In any case, tertiary level teachers definitely enjoy more autonomy than their counterparts teaching at other levels of education.

In the given educational scenario, this research sought to explore what happens in the language classroom at tertiary level. In the first section of this paper, the theory underpinning this research has been discussed, which is followed by a brief literature review. The description of the research design is followed by the analyses of the data and the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

Theoretical underpinnings

Autonomy in education is grounded in both constructivism and humanism but this research drew mainly on Self Determination Theory (SDT) to establish the need for autonomy in education. SDT is based on the premise that all human beings across all cultures have three basic psychological needs identified as autonomy, relatedness and competence, and the satisfaction of these needs is essential for their psychological wellbeing. One of several studies with similar results, cited by Niemiec and Ryan (2009, p.135-137) established that students assigned to autonomy supportive teachers were seen to display greater intrinsic motivation than those who studied under more controlling teachers. Another research finding concluded that students learning to teach as opposed to those learning to take a test showed not only greater intrinsic motivation but also better conceptual understanding of the learning material.

SDT has implications not only for students but also for teachers. Just as students lose their intrinsic motivation in controlling situations, teachers too lose their intrinsic motivation if they perceive their autonomy to be restricted by the authority. A study by Pelletier, Seguin-Levesque, and Legault (2002) found that “the more self-determined teachers are toward their work, the more autonomy supportive they are with their students.” Another study done by Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon and Kaplan in 2007 came up with similar results which were “consistent with the hypothesis that autonomous motivation for teaching promotes students’ autonomous motivation for learning by enhancing students’ experience of their teachers as autonomy supportive” (2007, p.773).

SDT, a macro theory of motivation, posits that “Intrinsically motivated behavior, which is propelled by people’s interest in the activity itself, is prototypically autonomous” while extrinsic motivation, “initiated and maintained by contingencies external to a person” is an example of “controlled motivation” (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 334). When the values associated with an externally regulated behaviour are

'internalized', it changes to "an internal regulation" and becomes "prototypically autonomous." The more fully it has been internalized, the more autonomous will be the subsequent, extrinsically motivated behavior. Using this assumption as the desired outcome of all efforts to foster autonomy in tertiary level students, it is hoped that students, whose only interest is to get enough marks in English language to secure a good CGPA, would eventually internalize the values of learning the language, and thus start putting in the effort to learn English of their own volition.

Review of Literature

Teacher Autonomy

Both teacher and learner autonomy have been defined in different ways by different scholars with each emphasizing one or the other dimension of autonomy. One broad definition of autonomy that applies to teachers and students alike has been provided by Weinstein, Przybylski and Ryan (2012, p. 398) who accord three basic attributes to autonomy or lack of it: Authorship/self-congruence, Interest-taking, and Susceptibility to control. The first two are positive, necessary attributes of autonomy, but the third refers to an absence of autonomous behaviour.

By authorship and self-congruence, it is understood that autonomous people are the authors of their own behaviour which is consistent with their basic values and beliefs. Interest-taking is defined as "the spontaneous tendency to openly reflect on inner and outer events" (Weinstein, Przybylski & Ryan, 2012, p. 398). Interest-taking facilitates a better understanding of the self, resulting in a keener self-awareness. Susceptibility to control is seen as the absence of autonomy and people who are less autonomous perceive "a lesser degree of personal choice and initiative in situations, and instead see behavior as a response to pressure from others' expectations or from introjected pressures and self-imposed 'have to's'" (Meissner, 1988; Perls, 1973; Ryan & Connell, 1989 cited in Weinstein, Przybylski & Ryan, 2012, p. 398). Individuals who display the first two attributes and are able to overcome the third are autonomous and three of their basic psychological needs can be satisfied.

However, according to different researchers, an autonomous teacher should also have the following attributes: *Critical reflection and the ability to self-direct one's professional development* are crucial in determining whether a teacher is autonomous or not. Sinclair (2009, p.184) writes that teachers will be able to "take informed and principled decisions about their teaching context" only if they have control over their own professional development. This implies that a teacher who is critically reflective and self-directs her own professional development is also one who will be able to take informed decisions about any changes needed in her teaching practices.

Dialogue and collaboration are also regarded as fundamental to the concept of autonomy. Benson (2001, p.12) writes how researchers emphasize that the "development of autonomy implies collaboration and interdependence". According to the Shizouka definition "... teacher autonomy can be strengthened by collaborative support and networking both within the institution and beyond. Negotiation thus forms an integral part of the process of developing teacher autonomy" (Barfield et al., 2001). Hence, teacher autonomy entails both independence and interdependence. Here dialogue provides a setting for collaborative critical thinking and negotiation

through which teachers can reach an agreement on how to bring about necessary changes.

Fostering learner autonomy is another intrinsic feature of teacher autonomy. Little (1995, p.180) argues that “language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous”. Learner autonomy in its simplest definition implies the ability to take the responsibility of one’s own learning. However, students do not come to the class with an innate ability to learn autonomously and the teacher cannot just hand over the responsibility of learning to them and relax. “...Learner empowerment entails that as teachers we bring our learners to accept responsibility for their own learning” (Little, 2000).

Autonomy supportive practices

Little (1995) argues that in second language learning “the learner's acceptance of responsibility for his or her learning entails the gradual development of a capacity for independent and flexible use of the target language.” Hence, teachers have to involve learners in “activities that require them to use the target language for genuinely communicative purposes, and thus allow them an equal share of discourse initiatives (Little 1995). Grolnick et al., (1997) and Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser and Deci (1996) suggest that autonomy-supportive teacher behaviour include “providing choice, encouraging self-initiation, minimising the use of controls, and acknowledging the other’s perspective and feelings (cited in Assor, Kaplan & Roth, 2002, p. 262). Teachers need to take into consideration their students’ needs, preferences and personal objectives when preparing the activities and teaching contents. According to Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, (2002); Reeve & Jang, (2006); Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, (2004), instructional contents such as these ensure students’ engagement because they present learning activities that have relevance for the students, “providing optimal challenges, highlighting meaningful learning goals, and supporting students’ volitional endorsement of classroom behaviors” (cited in Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010, p.588).

Hence, it is clear that teachers need to be aware of the importance of autonomy as well as what it entails to ensure a learning environment in the classroom that fosters autonomy in students.

Learner Autonomy

Henri Holec (1981, p.3) defined learner autonomy as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” and he emphasizes the need for students to take charge of their learning at all levels, i.e. setting up their learning objectives, determining the course content, selecting the methods to be used, monitoring the process of acquisition and lastly, evaluating their progress. However, this ability to take charge of all aspects of one’s learning, in Holec’s opinion, “is not inborn but must be acquired ...”

Method

Design

This was an exploratory, qualitative research and qualitative methods were used to both collect the data and to analyze it.

Research questions

- a) What was the tertiary level language teachers' perception of the concept of autonomy?
- b) Were their classroom practices autonomy supportive?
- c) What were their beliefs about their students?

Sample

Purposive sampling procedure was used to select the sample for this study. The participants were six tertiary level English language teachers from three private universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The teaching experience of the teachers ranged from 2 years to 9+ years. The teachers were chosen because they taught foundation level English language courses which were mandatory for students of all disciplines. These teachers had to teach classes of an average of over forty students.

Procedure

Open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The completed questionnaires were collected from the participants before the interviews and some questions were asked on basis of the answers given by the participants. The interviews were conducted in English and all participants except one answered questions in English. The interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the participants and later transcribed verbatim. Narrative analysis of the data was done and coding was used to identify the emerging thematic patterns.

Findings and Discussion

Teacher's perceived work autonomy

Despite having a fixed syllabus and textbook to follow, teachers expressed complete autonomy in their classroom practices and choice of additional resources. Except for one teacher, all teachers said that even though an evaluation grid with broad marks allocations for different types of assessment was provided by the authority they had the freedom to allocate marks according to their own discretion in further break ups of marks. For example, if 20 marks were allocated to creative writing, the teacher decided how much from the twenty to allocate to grammar and how much to mechanics and so on. Teachers, however, did not have much freedom in choosing their class timings. Lack of free classrooms made it difficult for institutions to accommodate changes in class timings and teachers seemed to understand and accept it. They had the freedom to attend conferences and seminars on their own initiative if they wanted to. Teacher responses indicated that teachers enjoyed a degree of autonomy in the important areas where teaching practices and access to resources

were concerned, and the few constraints that were there could be expected in any institution.

Teachers' autonomous practices

In reference to self-directed professional development, the findings of this research showed that teachers' practices were autonomous in some respects but not so much so in others. Only one teacher said that she observed her peers' classes because she wanted to learn new teaching styles and techniques and another said that, "I personally did not get the chance. But I have interest in doing so". The other three teachers had not observed their peers' classes. One teacher felt that peer observations were unnecessary because holding discussions with colleagues served the same purpose. The sixth teacher felt that peer-observation was not something he engaged in, because observing a teacher's class could make her feel uncomfortable.

All the teachers said that they discussed teaching strategies with their colleagues and one added that she loved to get new ideas from others. They all said that they reflected on their teaching because it was beneficial, and important to overcome one's limitations. All of them also read articles on innovative ideas in teaching. One teacher, however, added that she preferred other reading material to articles on teaching. All of them felt that innovative methods of teaching motivated students, and reading about them was essential for professional growth, and to bring about positive change. This was highly autonomous behaviour in the teachers.

All the teachers had attended teacher development programmes and workshops, but not one had attended any such programme on their own initiative. Two of the universities of the participants arranged workshops and seminars for the development of the faculty members and teachers had attended those. One teacher stated that they did not have to do anything else for their professional growth. Only one teacher from the third university said that if he got the opportunity to attend any workshop like the ones he had attended he would be willing to go by himself even if the university did not send him. It cannot be said with any certainty that teachers who attended in-service teacher development programmes would have done so on their own initiative.

Teachers' attitudes towards their students and autonomy supportive practices

Teachers were asked certain questions to find out how much autonomy they felt their students should be given. When asked whether they thought students had to be guided at every step, only three teachers felt that students should participate actively in the learning process and teachers should not burden them with too many guidelines. The other three teachers felt that students needed a lot of guidance with one of them writing that students are not mature enough, and another saying that students who are not proficient (in English) have to be guided. However, two of these teachers also believed that students should not be allowed to become teacher dependent. This was again seen as an autonomy supportive attitude. One teacher, however, did not express any such concern and her attitude was seen as non-autonomy supportive.

Teachers also believed that students did not know enough to set up their own learning goals. Only one teacher felt that with consultations with teachers, students could define their learning objectives. Here the teacher not only realized the need for

students to be able to identify their own learning goals but also the need for dialogue between teacher and students in the process. The other five teachers gave their own reasons for believing that students were not fit to decide their own learning goals. Hence, they showed a complete lack of understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. However, during the interview a teacher, who believed that students did not know how to set up their own learning goals, said that he sometimes had to change a lesson because his students told him that they needed to learn something else. This belied the statement that students did not know enough to determine their learning goals. This teacher's practice was autonomy supportive because he gave importance to the students' wishes and adjusted the lesson. However, only two teachers' beliefs conformed to the concept of autonomy regarding their students.

When asked whether teachers believed that they should select the reading material that their students read, only two teachers wrote that students should have a say in what they read. A third teacher said that it depended on the particular class but student wishes should be given importance. Two teachers said it was mainly for teachers to decide with one of them saying that he could take student wishes into account if he wanted. The last teacher wrote that his students did not want autonomy in this respect.

In practice when teachers told students to read books at home, they all gave some form of suggestions to the students as to what they might read because they believed students did not have much idea of what they should read. This was necessary as students who had never read anything outside their text books in English could not suddenly become aware of the kinds of reading materials available to them. One teacher let students choose but allowed them to read their chosen book only if he approved of it. A second teacher also said that if students brought something which was too easy, she persuaded them to choose something else. But to foster autonomy, students should have been allowed to make the ultimate selection of the reading materials and read whatever they had chosen. If learners do not feel that they have control over what they choose to read, their intrinsic motivation is not likely to be activated.

What is of significance is that all except one teacher said that most students did not read at home at all, even those who had the freedom to choose what they read. The teacher who monitored the reading of his students ensured that they read whatever he approved of. This refers back to the point that students needed to be aware of why they were learning the language and why reading was important. All the teachers tried to motivate students by telling them how important it was to learn English, and emphasized the importance of reading to learn the language. But obviously that was not enough. Teachers needed to have dialogues with the students where they could reach a consensus on how their redefined learning objectives could be achieved. Unless students' attitude towards learning English changed and they realized by themselves the importance of reading to reach their learning goals, no amount of autonomy given to them was going to veer them towards reading.

All the teachers agreed that it was important to discuss students' strengths and weaknesses with them and did so regularly. One teacher said that discussing their strengths encouraged them to improve more and another said that identifying their weaknesses was very important for 'effective learning'. Holding dialogues with students about their progress is autonomy supportive and teachers obviously

understood this as an important practice. Discussing the learners' strengths and weaknesses is also one way of helping them identify what they need to learn. Even though the course content was determined by the authorities, teachers had the freedom to add any component they felt was needed. Students could have been invited to suggest those elements to be included which were not already there. However, none of the teachers used these discussions for that purpose.

Teachers' behaviours were in keeping with their beliefs when four out of six teachers said that they did not involve students in any discussions regarding the choice of course content. One teacher said that he sometimes let the students choose certain advanced level content and another teacher said that she invited feedback from the students but the ultimate decision was hers and she decided what content to include and what not to. Teachers' behaviour in general was non-autonomy supportive.

One way of giving learners autonomy in course content is to ask them to bring resources of their own choice to class. Teachers could then create activities on those materials. When asked, teachers indicated that students usually just brought newspaper saying that they couldn't find anything. Two teachers even gave suggestions as to where students could find good stories, essays etc. but, teachers implied that students did not really put in the effort to find something that they themselves could enjoy. One teacher actually said that his students did not want the responsibility to bring resources to the class. This resistance to autonomy demonstrated by the students showed the level of teacher dependence they had and how reluctant they were to get out of their comfort zone to actually work toward their learning. Here, the teachers' practices were autonomy supportive, but students seemed resistant to exercising their autonomy.

Leni Dam (1995, cited in Little, 2009) regards the use of the target language in the classroom as autonomy supportive. David Little (2009), too, emphasizes that classroom interaction in the language class should always be in the target language because to learn a language students need to have "access to a full range of discourse roles, initiating as well as responding" (Little, 2009, p.153). This is intended to provide students with enough scope to use the language freely to say and share what they want. In fundamental language courses, where speaking in English is compulsory, all the teachers said that although learners usually had a great deal to say, they did not speak up because they were reluctant to make mistakes in front of others. One teacher said that, "since they must talk in English in class they do not want to say anything even though they have a lot to say, ... except for a few students, which is very rare". Other teachers said similar things about their students.

Only two teachers made a practice of asking students to choose their own assignment topic because they felt that giving learners that choice helped them remain motivated. Two others said that they sometimes let the students choose. One teacher said that even if he asked them to choose, they came to him for suggestions instead of thinking it out by themselves. Another teacher said that she discussed with her students but in the end gave them what she wanted them to do. Except for two teachers, the others were not autonomy supportive in this practice.

Two of the teachers felt that it was their responsibility, so they decided which units or activities should be done in a particular class, while another said that she let students

give their opinion but the ultimate decision was hers. Another teacher said that most of the time he was the one to decide but sometimes he did not even have to invite students to discuss the issue. Students themselves told him that they would rather do something else. If what they wanted was within the course content and not something they had already covered, he modified his lessons accordingly. Two other teachers were autonomy supportive as they held discussions with their students and took their opinions to decide what activity or unit to do.

Teachers asked students to reflect on their progress. One teacher said that learners did reflect on their progress and it helped them. Others said that a few students did but not all. All the teachers said that they discussed the students work with them to help them understand whether they had improved or not. Sometimes that was done in class, sometimes teachers asked them to talk to them individually. In this the teachers' practices were autonomy supportive.

None of the teachers had ever asked their students to assess their work. Self-evaluation promotes reflection and so it is an important facet of an autonomous learner. "Self-assessments help learners monitor their level of success in specific learning tasks. A series of self-assessments will contribute to monitoring progress towards specific learning objectives" (Gardner, 2000, p.52). Harris (1997, p.13) suggests the importance of "diagnostic activities" to initiate students to self-assessment. Involving learners in peer correction also helps them to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and should be practiced in class. This was also something teachers in this study did not practice. One teacher said he had not thought about it. Another felt that it could embarrass the students and a third teacher said that students tended to mark correct items as wrong. That teacher failed to note that such a mistake could also be a learning process for that student. Only one teacher made a practice of orally asking students to say whether an answer given by a fellow student is correct or not, but she did not involve students in correcting their peers' written work. So in this respect also all except one teacher displayed a lack of autonomy supportive behaviour.

Teachers in this study told students to read as much as possible and watch video clips and movies in English as a strategy to learn the language. While this is a strategy to learn English through exposure to the language, there are more specific meta-cognitive, cognitive and social-affective language learning strategies that teachers need to make students aware of for them to learn effectively. None of the teachers in this study seemed to teach these strategies to the students. Since these students had only had to memorize answers and essays etc. before reaching tertiary level, they had never needed any other strategies than those needed to recall and retrieve information. Hence, there was a need to familiarize them with some language learning strategies which they could try out before settling with the ones best suited to their learning styles. Teachers may not have had a clear idea of what learning strategies entail and so in this respect they were not autonomy supportive.

A disturbing teacher belief became apparent when five out of six teachers said that teachers should have total control over their class. Two of them said that classes should be interactive and teachers should not overwhelm the students but they should be the ones in control, otherwise learning objectives would not be met. Only one

teacher categorically said that if teachers have total control, the situation would become suffocating asking “Why should a class be so full of the teacher only?”

Students who have always been teacher dependent cannot suddenly be told to learn on their own or even set up their learning objectives on their own. This is where reflective dialogues between teacher and learners become essential. Unless students realize by themselves that they need to learn the language, and not just pass examinations, no amount of responsibility put on them will make them autonomous learners. Only if students are able to realize and define their own learning objectives will teacher’s autonomy supportive practices see some success.

Implications of the findings

To sum it up, the findings revealed that the respondents enjoyed full autonomy in the classroom and their classroom practices were mostly autonomy supportive. Yet, learners, with the exception of a few, were not seen to become autonomous learners. Teachers found it difficult to motivate them to use English or put in any effort to gain proficiency in English. However, a significant fact that the findings also revealed was that teacher beliefs about their students and about their own roles in the classroom mostly did not conform to the concept of autonomy. Teachers mainly believed that students were not capable of taking control of any aspect of their learning. Therefore, it was concluded that the teachers lacked an understanding of what autonomy entails, and their attitude toward their students may have been one of the key reasons for student’s resistance to exercising autonomy in even those areas where it was given to them. This indicates that teachers enjoying full autonomy are not necessarily able to effectively foster it in their students even if they are less controlling and more approachable. Their innate belief about their students obviously plays an integral role in ensuring a truly autonomy supportive classroom environment.

Teachers, therefore, need to have the “ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning” (Thavenius, 1999, p.160). Thavenius (1999, p.161) actually goes on to define what an autonomous teacher should be able to do. Firstly, teachers have to let learners take responsibility but also “remain co-responsible”; secondly, teachers have to allow students to discover their own needs, and their potential without interfering and allow the balance of power to shift in the classroom. It is also important for teachers to “reflect on what happens in the classroom and why”, and “help each learner find his individual needs” (1999, p.161). Most importantly, teachers need to believe in their students’ ability to assume the responsibility of their learning. This cannot happen unless teacher training programmes are geared to raise awareness in the teachers. Through collaborative critical reflections, teachers have to come to the realization about why their own beliefs need to change and how a change in their own approach can help nurture autonomy in their students. As David Little has said, “teacher education should be subject to the same processes of negotiation as are required for the promotion of learner autonomy in the language classroom” (1995, p.180). Without such training one cannot hope to expect much change in the language learning scenario in Bangladesh.

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Contact email: nazeen.1961@gmail.com