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LEARNING AS DIALOGUE: THE DEPENDENCE OF LEARNER AUTONOMY ON TEACHER AUTONOMY*

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This article is concerned with learner autonomy in formal language learning contexts (schools, colleges and universities). It begins with some general reflections on the nature of learner autonomy and goes on to consider how autonomy is to be fostered, focusing first on learning strategies and learner training and then on the pedagogical dialogue and the role of the teacher. It argues that while learning strategies and learner training can play an important supporting role in the development of learner autonomy, the decisive factor will always be the nature of the pedagogical dialogue; and that since learning arises from interaction and interaction is characterized by interdependence, the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers. The article concludes by briefly summarizing the implications of this argument for teacher education.

LEARNER AUTONOMY: SOME PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

The basis of learner autonomy is that the learner accepts responsibility for his or her learning. This acceptance of responsibility has both socio-affective and cognitive implications: it entails at once a positive attitude to learning and the development of a capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning with a view to bringing them as far as possible under conscious control. Although much that has been written on the subject in recent years might seem to indicate the contrary, there is nothing new or mysterious about learner autonomy. In formal educational contexts, genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous. Thus our enterprise is not to promote new kinds of learning, but by pursuing learner autonomy as an explicit goal, to help more learners to succeed.

By definition, the autonomous learner tends to integrate whatever he or she learns in the formal context of the classroom with what he or she has already become as a result of developmental and experiential learning. In other words, the autonomous learner has the means to transcend the barriers between learning and living that have been a major preoccupation of educational psychology, educational theory and curriculum development (see, e.g. Bruner, 1966; Barnes, 1976; Illich, 1979; Rogers, 1983). Gardner (1993: 6f.) has refined this dichotomous view by distinguishing three kinds of learner: the intuitive learner, the traditional student and the disciplinary expert. The intuitive learner is "the young child who is superbly equipped to learn language and other symbolic systems and who evolves serviceable theories of the physical world and of the world of other people during the opening years of life"; the traditional student is "the youngster from

age seven to age 20, roughly, who seeks to master the literacies, concepts and disciplinary forms of the school", but who responds "in ways similar to preschool or primary school youngsters" when removed from the context of the classroom. The disciplinary expert is "an individual *of any age* who has mastered the concepts and skills of a discipline or domain and can apply such knowledge appropriately in new situations" (italics added). Our autonomous learner is Gardner's disciplinary expert, always allowing that disciplinary expertise can exist at many different levels of elaboration.

The importance of learner autonomy is sometimes explained in terms of a positive relation between present and future learning. Learners who accept responsibility for their learning are more likely to achieve their learning targets; and if they achieve their learning targets, they are more likely to maintain a positive attitude to learning in the future. I accept this argument as far as it goes, but it seems to me to be only part of the story. For in the case of language learning the whole point of developing learner autonomy is to enable learners to become autonomous users of their target language. In other words, learner autonomy has two distinct dimensions, one pedagogical and the other communicative. There is a sense in which pedagogical autonomy clearly precedes communicative autonomy: we may successfully practise pedagogical autonomy from the first language lesson onwards, but it will be some time before our learners can venture forth as autonomous language users in the target language community. We must be careful, however, not to allow this obvious fact to mislead us into erecting false barriers between language learning and language use. After all, language learning and language use engage the same psycholinguistic mechanisms. It is impossible to learn a language without at the same time using whatever knowledge of it we already possess, however slight; and all users of a language, native as well as non-native, continue to learn that language for as long as they are involved with it. Two of the most productive strands of applied linguistic research in recent years have concerned themselves, respectively, with learning strategies and communication strategies (see, e.g. Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Færch and Kasper, 1983). The distinction between the two kinds of strategy is certainly legitimate in terms of research focus, but as a matter of psycholinguistic fact they frequently merge.

The interdependence of pedagogical autonomy and communicative autonomy furnishes the means by which we can bridge the gulf that so easily separates language learning from language use. The successful practice of autonomy logically entails the interaction of these two dimensions from the very earliest stages of learning. That is what enables the language learner (as nascent "disciplinary expert") to undertake target language performance with a degree of confidence that is usually lacking in language learners who fall into Gardner's "traditional student" category. This confidence to use the target language in a personally appropriate way is a necessary precondition for, but also the outcome of, the kind of communicative activity that gradually but ineluctably promotes second language development. It is the single most impressive achievement of successful projects to promote learner autonomy (see, e.g. Dam, 1990); and it is the single most important reason why we should attempt to develop autonomy in our language learners.

LEARNING STRATEGIES AND LEARNER TRAINING

In formal educational contexts learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning—teachers must help them to do so; and they will not necessarily find it easy to reflect critically on the learning process—teachers must first provide them with appropriate tools and

with opportunities to practise using them. We can now draw on a rapidly growing body of empirical research into learning styles and learning strategies (see, e.g. Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Duda and Riley, 1990); and we can have recourse to eminently practical proposals for pedagogical practice (e.g. Oxford, 1990; Dickinson, 1992). But valuable though these research findings and practical proposals undoubtedly are, knowledge of them cannot be guaranteed to translate without further ado into learner autonomy. It is important to emphasize this point, since the literature on learning strategies and learner training currently seems to provide the basis for most projects aimed at developing autonomy in language learners. For the same reason it is also worth pointing out some of the more obvious dangers that lie in wait for the teacher who treats them as so many components of an increasingly complex pedagogical technology:

(1)   To the extent that all human beings are endowed with the same cognitive equipment, some aspects of second language learning must be universal. Swain (1985) has argued, for example, that *all* learners must strive to express their meanings in the target language if their communicative competence is to develop. On the other hand, it is clear that individuals differ as to their cognitive style (see Gardner, 1993 for references), which means that they will not all approach a particular learning task in the same way. At present, however, there is a large grey area in which it is by no means easy to be sure when we are dealing on the one hand with behaviour that is indispensable to all learners and on the other hand with learning strategies that reflect a particular cognitive style. This suggests that it may sometimes make more sense to focus on the cognitive demands of the communicative tasks our learners need to master than on measures designed to mediate between their perceived learning styles and successful task performance.

(2)   To the extent that they are not simply inborn but are shaped by developmental and experiential learning, individual cognitive styles are culturally determined. The same is true, by extension, of learning styles. This means that when learners are faced with a particular learning task it is by no means certain that they will deploy a strategy appropriate to that task. When they do not, it is no doubt desirable to bring about a modification of their learning style. But again we simply do not know enough to be able to intervene with complete confidence in every instance.

(3)   The extent to which learning strategies are teachable and learning styles are directly modifiable remains an open question (see, e.g. Skehan, 1989: p. 98). In any case, the time constraints that are a major factor in shaping every programme of language teaching are likely to set strict limits on direct learner training. It seems likely that a continuous process of making learners aware of strategic possibilities is a safer bet in terms of both feasibility and likely effectiveness. Teaching learning strategies, after all, can never be the same thing as teaching communicative competence.

(4)   It seems clear that to some extent successful language learners are able to manage affective and cognitive aspects of their learning (see respectively Naiman *et al.,* 1978 and O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). But many of the processes involved in successful second language development will always remain inaccessible to introspection and conscious manipulation. This is especially true of the processes of internalization and automatization on which fluency in reciprocal oral communication depends.

(5)   In our concern for the learner as an individual, with his or her own cognitive style and preferred learning strategies, we may overlook the fact that learning is never solitary or solipsistic. The psychological interaction that drives developmental and experiential learning typically proceeds within a framework of social interaction; and even when learning seems to lack this social framework, as when a learner reads a textbook, the psychological process involved includes a covert, internalized version of social interaction (see Widdowson, 1983 and cf. Vygotsky, 1978). It is sometimes thought that learner autonomy necessarily entails total independence—of the teacher, of other learners and of formally approved curricula. But this is not so: total independence is not autonomy but autism. Allwright (1990: p. 12) is surely right when he defines autonomy as "a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence".

This last point brings me to the main concern of this article: the role of the teacher.

PEDAGOGICAL DIALOGUE: THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

It is often argued that the pursuit of learner autonomy requires a shift in the role of the teacher from purveyor of information to facilitator of learning and manager of learning resources. Stories abound of teachers who, inspired by the ideal of learner autonomy, have interpreted this argument all too literally, telling their learners that it is now up to them to be responsible for their learning and withdrawing to a corner of the classroom in order to manage the resources that will magically facilitate 30 or more individual learning processes. When nothing happens the teacher usually concludes that learner autonomy does not work.

As Allwright has observed (1991: 6f.), there is a sense in which teachers and learners are inevitably co-producers of classroom language lessons. In the promotion of learner autonomy the teacher's task is to bring learners to the point where they accept equal responsibility for this co-production, not only at the affective level but in terms of their readiness to undertake organizational (hence also discourse) initiatives. How, in general terms, is this to be done?

Salmon (1988: 30 pass.) points out that attempts to explain why some teachers are good and others bad have tended to focus either on the skills required for effective teaching or on the personality of the effective teacher. Both kinds of explanation say little about the content of teaching, which is assumed to be independent of teaching skills on the one hand and the teacher's personality on the other. But, to borrow the terminology of personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1963; Bannister and Fransella, 1989), classroom learning involves an encounter between a number of personal construct systems, all of them having some things in common but each at the same time uniquely individual; and—staying with the idea of personal constructs—there is a sense in which, whatever her subject, the teacher cannot help but teach "herself". The curriculum that she presents to her learners is hers and no one else's; however closely she may seek to follow a prescribed programme, she can only communicate her necessarily unique interpretation of it. Recognition of this point provides a basis for developing the teacher autonomy which I believe to be a prerequisite for the development of learner autonomy; for it is the starting point for the complex and probably protracted process of negotiation by which learners can be brought to accept responsibility for their learning.

Before embarking on this process of negotiation, the teacher must decide on the areas in which she will seek to promote learner autonomy. She must decide, in other words, whether and to what extent it is possible for the learners to determine their own learning objectives, select their own learning materials and contribute to the assessment of their learning progress. In this she will be guided by such factors as the institutional framework within which she is working, and the age, educational background and target language competence of her learners. It is important to emphasize that even aims and learning targets prescribed by a government department can, by process of negotiation, become the personal aims and learning targets of a group of learners; and that by the same token, highly structured learning materials can be exploited in ways calculated to develop learner autonomy (for further consideration of these points, see Little, 1991).

In initiating and sustaining the process of negotiation the teacher will draw on her "disciplinary expertise" (to revert to Gardner's terminology). This will include (i) knowledge of universal features and individual differences in second language learning; (ii) views on the appropriate balance between exposition and practice—when, for example, it is likely to be beneficial to work analytically on some formal feature of the target language, and when it is best to give priority to communicative tasks; and (iii) knowledge (drawn from the literature on learning strategies and learner training) of practical measures—e.g. learner journals or log-books, regular reviews of individual and group progress—calculated to make learners' developing autonomy more explicit. In addition the teacher's "disciplinary expertise" must include an awareness of the multitude of different forms that classroom discourse can take and a sense of how to initiate and deploy them to best advantage.

As I argued above, in the special case of 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. Thus all autonomy projects will necessarily tend to create the circumstances in which learners are engaged in activities that require them to use the target language for genuinely communicative purposes, and thus allow them an equal share of discourse initiatives. In this way the target language becomes, in the fullest possible sense, the medium of teaching and learning. Project work, group work and pair work will arise from matters of genuine concern to the learners, and as a consequence will tend to make sparing use of role plays and simulations. In discussion of communicative approaches to language teaching the point has often been made that formal accuracy alone is an insufficient measure of learner achievement. Successful autonomy projects underline this point, demonstrating again and again that fossilized errors are no barrier to effective target language use, even at very advanced levels. Regrettably, public and institutional examinations mostly pay no more than lip service to this truth.

I proposed in the first section of this article that there is nothing novel about learner autonomy; that genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous. The same is true of teacher autonomy. Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers. If, as I have argued, learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent then the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy. In other words, learner autonomy becomes a matter for teacher education in two separate but related senses. We must provide trainee teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in the learners who will be given into their charge, but we must also give them

a first-hand experience of learner autonomy in their training. The last part of the article enlarges on this point.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

Nowadays it is reasonable to expect that language teacher education will include (among other things) study of empirical research into second language acquisition, learning strategies and classroom discourse (for this last topic see, e.g. Chaudron, 1988; Allwright and Bailey, 1991); and in some cases the knowledge gained from such study may be consolidated by small-scale research projects that students undertake on their own or in collaboration with their peers. In this way prospective teachers can be provided with a sound basis on which to construct arguments demonstrating the importance of learner autonomy. But a capacity to argue the importance of learner autonomy is not the same thing as a capacity to promote learner autonomy in the classroom. Language learners are more likely to operate as independent flexible users of their target language if their classroom experience has already pushed them in this direction; by the same token, language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous.

What I am advocating, therefore, is that teacher education should be subject to the same processes of negotiation as are required for the promotion of learner autonomy in the language classroom. Aims and learning targets, course content, the ways in which course content is mediated, learning tasks, and the assessment of learner achievement must all be negotiated; and 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. Rogers (1983) remains one of the best sources of practical example for this enterprise, especially Herbert Levitan's account of his experiment in facilitating the learning of neurophysiology.

In my experience this kind of approach is equally salutory for lecturers and students. On the one hand it exposes lecturers to the same risks they are encouraging their students to take in their classrooms, reminding them constantly that once the teacher relinquishes control it is impossible for him or her not to recognize how messy and indeterminate most learning is—and impossible to escape the insecurities and uncertainties that such recognition brings. On the other hand, this approach compels students to be much more than consumers of ready-made courses that all too easily provide the model for inflexible course structures and lesson plans in their own classrooms. Such an approach will never be entirely comfortable or entirely successful; though it is important to recognize that the "success" of more traditional approaches may lie more in the neatness of their objective structure and presentation than in the fruitfulness of the interaction they provoke.

When it does succeed, teacher education that proceeds via negotiation between lecturers and students is a powerful tool for the production of that "sense of plausibility" (Prabhu, 1987) or "sense of coherence" (Allwright, 1991) which provides the day-to-day framework within which the teacher exercises his or her "disciplinary expertise". The current preoccupation with learner autonomy has its origin in the concern for the learner as individual that has been the single most influential factor shaping pedagogical reform over the past three decades. Much progress has been made by those teachers who have taken the plunge, but they remain a tiny minority. If we are to achieve large-scale progress in the promotion of learner autonomy we must now bring our focus of

concern back to the teacher, and especially to the way in which we organize and mediate teacher education.

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