

LEARNING TO REFLECT: FROM LEARNER AUTONOMY TO TEACHER AUTONOMY

The successful promotion of learner autonomy in language learning classrooms is closely linked to the exploration of teacher autonomy in teacher education (e.g. Little, 2000, 1995) and the encouragement of reflective teaching. By experiencing autonomy for themselves and reflecting on the nature of teaching/learning, trainee teachers will be empowered to implement their own future pedagogy for autonomy. This paper will report on the use of interactive dialogue journals with methodology students in a university learning context as a vehicle for both the written exploration of relevant pedagogical issues arising from course content and the consequent raising of metacognitive awareness.

The role of reflection in the dual fields of foreign language learning and teacher education, further informed by the twin concepts of learner and teacher autonomy, is a pedagogical issue which seems to be gaining greater currency in recent years (e.g. Little, 1995, 2001; Ridley, 1997; Farrell, 1998; Posteguillo and Palmer, 2000; Vieira, 2001). It seems logical to suggest that the implementation of a pedagogy for autonomy in foreign language classrooms by both pre-service and practising teachers could be promoted by guided reflection on their own previous experience of learner autonomy. In order to explore the link between learner and teacher autonomy, I have begun to investigate the value of dialogue journal writing and written reflection as a means for Canarian undergraduate EFL Methodology students to experience, and reflect on, teaching and learning in an autonomous way in order to pave the way for the encouragement of teacher and learner autonomy in their own future classrooms. In the following paper, I shall describe the use of interactive journals as an optional evaluation component of an elective introductory course in EFL Methodology at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and example excerpts from a selection of journals will be provided in accordance with the recurring themes I have found on an initial analysis of the data. These will constitute the springboard for more detailed investigation with data obtained in later courses.

I. FROM LEARNER AUTONOMY TO TEACHER AUTONOMY

In order to provide a clear focus for our analysis of journal writing, we shall briefly examine the link between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy before focusing on

the implementation of interactive dialogue journals as a learning tool for both myself and my learners or, more appropriately, learner-teachers. Undoubtedly, learner autonomy has been one of dominant topics in foreign language teaching research in recent years and is still very much a central issue. This complex concept has been addressed and defined in a multitude of publications, with definitions focusing on either the technical, psychological or political dimensions of learning, which at times may intertwine.¹ One of the recurring characteristics is that of *responsibility* for learning (e.g. Holec, 1981; Little, 1991, 2001; Dam, 1995). Holec has famously defined autonomy as “the ability to assume responsibility for one’s own affairs” and in the context of learning autonomy this means the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (1981: 3).

The acceptance of responsibility by learners for their own learning is not a single act, but a gradually developing state of mind informed by critical reflection. Therefore learner autonomy also invariably embraces concepts such as learning to learn, reflection or awareness raising, and metacognition. Little (1991: 4) defines autonomy as “a capacity [...] for critical reflection, decision making, and independent action”, with learners being essentially interdependent, and highlights the role of the teacher and the social-interactive context of learning. He later explores the dialogic as well as social aspects of autonomy, and the role of the target language for reflection (2001: 47-53). For him, three fundamental pedagogical principles are (i) learner empowerment; (ii) reflectivity; (iii) target language use. From this perspective, learner autonomy is gradually acquired through both by reflection and interaction with others rather than achieved instantly.

Raising awareness of one’s learning processes and guided reflection in a social learning setting are, for us, fundamental elements in promoting learner autonomy. Nunan (1996: 20) reports on the effect of encouraging learners to self-monitor and self-evaluate in recent research, and discusses the implications derived from his own study (1994) in which a group of thirty undergraduates were given opportunities to reflect on their learning in guided journals in the same way as will be described here. He claims that autonomy is enhanced when learners are actively involved in productive use of the target language, when learners are given the opportunity to activate their language

¹ Benson (1997: 25) claims there to be at least three basic versions of autonomy: (i) autonomy as the act of learning on one’s own and the technical ability to do so; (ii) autonomy as the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one’s own learning; (iii) autonomy as control over the content and processes of one’s learning.

outside the classroom, and when learners are encouraged to self-monitor and self-assess, all of these catered for in journal writing as we shall go on to demonstrate.

A guiding principle in this study is the *dependence of teacher autonomy on learner autonomy* (Little, 1995, 2001): (i) to enable teachers to foster autonomy in their learners by experiencing autonomy themselves and (ii) to help teachers apply the same reflective and self-managing processes used in their own learning to their teaching practices. As Vieira (1999: 27) has found in her research with pre-service FL teacher training which includes the integration of learner autonomy as a basic component in Methodology courses, “there is a close interplay between reflective practice and a pedagogy for autonomy”. An interpretative rather than transmissive view of education is upheld here, as Vieira herself claims:

In my view, a pedagogy for autonomy in the school context essentially seeks to facilitate an approximation of the learner to the learning process and content, by setting conditions which increase motivation to learn, interdependence relationships, discourse power, ability to learn and to manage learning, and a critical attitude towards teaching and learning (1999: 17).

Reflective teaching, which has the aim of empowering teachers through an inquiry-oriented approach and the personal and social reconstruction of pedagogical knowledge (e.g. Farrell, 1998; Posteguillo and Palmer, 2000), is a recently emerging paradigm in ESL/EFL teacher education. There is a close relationship between reflective teaching and autonomous learning since “reflective teaching facilitates and is facilitated by a pedagogy for autonomy” (Vieira, 1999: 20). Thus teachers and learners can become interdependent partners in the social reconstruction of academic and social knowledge. Teachers are also by nature ongoing learners as they reflect on and take control of their own learning processes as developing professionals which will affect their ability to encourage their students’ autonomy at the same time. Also, by reflecting on their own language learning experience, teachers are much better equipped to put themselves in the position of their own learners.

II. THE USE OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Both learner diaries and dialogue journals have been used in many research projects and as tools for learning or instruments of evaluation in learning/teaching contexts (e.g.

Bailey, 1983, 1990; Peyton, 1990; Mlynarczyk, 1998; Burton and Carroll, 2001; Eken, 2001; Santana-Williamson, 2001). Interactive dialogue journals, although less frequently researched than diaries, are currently evolving as revealing instruments in qualitative research; they have also been employed by the author as a data collection instrument in a longitudinal study on learning strategy training applied to writing skills (Oxbrow, 1999, 2000, 2003), as well as a teaching and learning aid for several years. However, rather than focus the use of journals for the eliciting of data for research purposes, course evaluation or language performance, here I wish to address their value as a cognitive tool for autonomous learning for advanced learners; in them they are encouraged to explore and assimilate teaching and learning issues as well as to raise their metacognitive awareness and improve their written fluency.

Both diaries and interactive journals have been widely used in teacher education programmes (e.g. Bailey, 1990; Halbach, 1995; Gray, 1998; Zeyrek, 2001). Yet most published works in this area revolve are directed at new teachers or graduate students; of particular relevance for the current study is the fact that few studies exist in the use of journals with undergraduate students. I have focused here exclusively on the use of written reflection and self-exploration in journals in a teacher training context with undergraduate students of 'English Philology' (English Language and Literature). My original aims were to obtain feedback and information about my learners and their needs, to provide the opportunity for self-exploration and to encourage free writing practice, which later evolved into the current examination of learner and teacher autonomy. A non-directive, open-ended approach was adopted in setting up the journal writing activity, although learners' entries were at times explicitly guided by their teacher's response.

Journals cater for both the individual cognitive and social interactive dimensions of learning in the pedagogical dialogue providing the opportunity for learners to step back, observe externally, and revisit issues (Little, 1995, 2001) in their quest for greater autonomy. The mind is by nature dialogic, and cognitive processes are also interactive, thus the role of the teacher corresponds to that of supporting performance in learning as an essentially social activity: the learners are empowered gradually with direction. The role of writing and written interaction with the teacher can thus be seen as a support for learning, and the use of the target language is the channel through which teaching and learning take place. My students are experiencing autonomy themselves by means of

writing freely in their journals and reflecting in the target language; this will hopefully be carried over into their later teaching careers.

III. THE LEARNING CONTEXT

I shall briefly describe here the implementation of dialogue journals with undergraduate students enrolled in an elective fifteen-week ELT Methodology subject at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria from February to June 2002. Although covering traditional teacher education areas such as linguistics, psychology and second language acquisition as well as practical classroom techniques, the course was also designed to not only be prescriptive in its approach to teaching methodology, but also holistic and reflective in order to involve participants in “developing theories of teaching, understanding the nature of teacher decision making, and strategies for critical self-awareness and self-evaluation” (Richards and Nunan, 1990: xi). Brief guidelines² were distributed at the beginning of the course when the dialogue journal was introduced as an alternative means of assessment³ rather than a written examination. Although these third and fourth year undergraduates knew very little about teaching as practitioners in a professional context since they were in fact embarking on their first pre-service training course, they in fact demonstrated a wide variety of valuable insights as critical recipients of teaching practice which would prove essential in order to assimilate pedagogical lessons they had already learned as students. This underlying knowledge needed to be activated and written reflection in journals seemed to be one way to do this.

My learners were required to write and reflect on issues arising from class sessions and out-of-class reading in their journals and hand them in after two or three weeks for

² See Appendix 1.

³ At the end of the course the journals were evaluated following criteria such as the range of issues covered, evidence of supplementary reading, critical perspective or frequency of entries.

me to respond to what they had written, or whenever they wished to elicit a response. My response would clarify points, answer questions, continue an ongoing discussion or provide further food for thought. The language would not be evaluated or corrected in any way; however, it is interesting to note that two participants did ask for explicit correction of their entries. Significantly, one of them later discussed the inhibiting quality of correction and the role of fluency in language learning having found the evident progress in their writing skills in the journal highly motivating, which itself demonstrates a growing awareness. As this student states:

The fact that there are activities which are only created for fluency aims (like this diary) or speaking activities without immediate correction seems surprising and good to me. I thought that accuracy was the only way [...] and that there was no room for fluency. Now I understand when I don't know who said that mistakes will take care of themselves.⁴

In this particular group, nineteen learners participated in the journal writing activity out of a total of thirty-six. One student opted to use computer format, whereas the rest were hand-written in notebooks. A minority of learners wrote the minimum, and limited themselves to impersonal summarisation of course content or out-of-class reading; most made full and creative use of this vehicle for written reflection, and discussed, explored, reflected and connected key issues to their own experiences of learning or their futures as language teachers.⁵ Some discussed affective aspects such as low motivation or stress before exams and the role of affective factors in language learning; others used their journals to clarify or verify theoretical concepts with their teacher; many provided comments on their peer teaching experiences required in the course from a self-critical

⁴ This and subsequent quotations from learners' journals are verbatim and have not been corrected or altered in any way

⁵ See Mlynarczyk, 1998 for an interesting discussion of different reactions to journal writing.

stance. The entries increasingly became more focused as they were guided by my responses although some ignored teacher questions or suggestions.

IV. ANALYSIS OF LEARNER ENTRIES: EMERGING THEMES

It has been an extremely difficult task to select entries as examples of the recurring themes I have found in the journals, but it was greatly enriching to reread these written conversations again, and this helped me to reflect more on my own teaching and the objectives and organisation of my course just as I was about to start teaching it again. Interactive journal writing has undoubtedly helped me reflect on the role of teacher autonomy as I explore my own teaching practice. The journals also became a channel of communication between teacher and student as I became much more aware of my students as individuals and enjoyed a much more personalised relationship with them. What follows is a selection of learner comments corresponding to the most relevant themes in relation to the use of dialogue journals for fostering greater learner and teacher autonomy.

Previous language learning experience

This was one of the most common areas to be commented on as my learners connected new ideas from class discussion or out-of-class reading texts with their past experience and revisited them from a new perspective. The exploration of learning styles, anxiety, teacher roles, and the traditional priority of form over meaning frequently appeared. A recurring theme was the need to motivate learners and be creative, as well as criticisms of the authoritative teacher figure they had experienced: as one learner comments: “I remember some classes where we felt anxious and afraid of being asked, and even there’re people who don’t attend class for that [...] Also here, there was a subject in which, when the teacher asked, an oppressive air filled the class,

we sensed the tension. Fortunately, she herself answered.” Most expressed a desire for pedagogical improvement in their own social context and showed awareness of the need for their own professional growth in the future:

I am so used to, especially from high school, being just a number, and the fact that teachers and professors come to class, give us, or better ‘throw up’ the lessons and lectures and go away. It is something not generalised, of course, and I think it is changing especially in the newest generations of teachers, especially because they have been trained. But I would dare to say that even in my generation that has grown up in the democracy I could tell you a lot of anecdotes of me and my classmates having a bad learning experience in some subject because of teachers abusing his/her authority.

Discussion of class activities/readings

Many learners used their journals to reflect and comment on assigned readings from the course, often entering into an enriching dialogue with me on a variety of relevant matters. It is evident that by writing about their reading they were more able to engage with the content and assimilate key concepts as well as experience an increase in motivation to learn as shown in the sample comment below:

A part of the subject I liked a lot was that about the psychological theories of behaviourism and cognitivism, because that of trying to explain the learning and nature of language is something that fascinates me, and especially the role and power of the mind. The origins of our ability to speak and the connections with the mind seem to me so mysterious and amazing, so I want to study them in a deeper way. Even,

I'm reading all the information I can get, and this is a field that I'd like to investigate one day.

Issues affecting learning and teaching

Many learners wrote about the role of the teacher as shown in the following comment:

A good teacher is not someone who knows the subject well. It is someone who tries to integrate every single student, makes him/her feel comfortable and secure in the classroom, and leaves him/her with a positive feeling about the subject and about themselves as learners.

Other topics frequently discussed included the dichotomy of learning versus acquisition, the role of grammar, learning styles and learning strategies. The nature of motivation is discussed in the example below:

One important factor that influences in people's motivation is the social context. [...] However, it is very important that people feel that they are the cause of their own actions rather than believing that other people cause their actions. Motivation is such a complex area involving so many interrelated factors that it would be a mistake to take one narrow view. For teachers, it is important that they need to be sensitive to the range of issues involved, and to take a flexible approach to helping the learner along their route towards autonomy.

Learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy was addressed at the beginning of the course and gave rise to much valuable reflection, such as the following excerpt:

Many people have the wrong idea that the best teacher is that who guides and helps his students constantly. They do not seem to realise that one of the main characteristics of human communication is creativity, and

creativity cannot be properly developed if we depend on somebody's teaching. Students must be taught to be independent, to achieve autonomy when they are learning. A teacher must be seen as a facilitator, someone who provides his students the necessary means of learning (strategies, activities, sources, context).

Future teaching career

Some students provided revealing insights on their own future as teachers and the need for continuous professional development, thus clearly illustrating the link between teacher and learner autonomy as shown in the following example:

In fact, I don't want to stop being a learner, though I can teach. I don't want to stop being a person!! Something I do not understand is that apparent almost innate disposition of most teachers to sharply separate their jobs from their being humans.

As another student perceptively remarks: "[...] I think that is important in order to think about how we were taught. Because of that we are more conscious of the problems that our learners will have and what we have to do in order to solve those problems."

Journal writing as a learning tool

Journal writing as a way to experience learner autonomy also requires learners to reflect on why this is done. One student writes:

I am glad you gave us this chance, I feel I have got to know myself better. I have never stopped myself to think about my learning, my autonomy as a student of a foreign language. This diary has let me see both my faults and virtues not only as a student but also as a teacher.

Learners were thus often able to realise for themselves the many values of journal writing for more effective learning and even expressed their intention to use journals themselves as teachers:

By means of it [the journal] I can express my own opinions and experiences or ideas. [...] Moreover, I enjoy a lot writing it, especially when I read your comments that motivate me a lot. It takes me time doing it, but it's worth it. [...] It is also useful for those students who are shy and are afraid of expressing their opinions in class. [...] Anyway, when I am a teacher, I also hope to put it into practice with my learners because not only students can learn by means of it, but also teachers.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Although there remains much to do with the data I have accumulated in this study, I have already come to realise the intrinsic value of interactive dialogue journals for written reflection and developing insights on pedagogical issues with my undergraduate EFL Methodology students despite the extra burden of work involved. Metacognitive awareness and target language use are clearly enhanced and both learner empowerment and learner autonomy are experienced in a mutually rewarding learning/teaching encounter. We must not forget either the value of journal writing for fluency development as the target language becomes the medium of teaching and learning. Above all, it seems that my learners have recognised the pedagogical value of reflection by participating in an autonomous learning activity themselves. By encouraging reflection in pre-service teachers, we move towards a pedagogy for autonomy, and pave the way for future professional development therefore teacher training should promote critical reflection from the outset. Dialogue journals certainly appear to illustrate the maxim that reflective learning and teaching is a way of fostering autonomy. In the words of one of the participants in this course:

I must confess that it has been the most enjoyable task I have ever been asked to do. I have learnt a lot and I am completely sure that everything I have written in these pages will be very useful in my future as a teacher. Thanks for giving me this opportunity!

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APPENDIX 1

You should attempt to write in your diary or journal as regularly as possible and your entries should contain any thoughts or reflections you may have arising from the class sessions, your supplementary reading or your own experiences. Here are some suggestions of what you can write in the diary. You could:

1. react to class discussions/activities or describe them.
2. ask questions about supplementary reading texts/class discussions.
3. relate readings/discussions to your own experiences.
4. react to something you've read and give your own opinion.
5. describe something that you've read.
6. argue for/against something that you've read/discussed.
7. explore pedagogical implications of readings/discussions.
8. describe new knowledge you have obtained.
9. fit new knowledge into what you already knew.
10. question the applications, motivations, uses or significance of what you have learnt.
11. make connections between course content and previous experiences you have had as a teacher, language learner, etc.
12. argue for/against a particular technique/procedure.
13. reflect on our own experience in learning a foreign language.
14. evaluate the course as a whole and what you have learnt.

(adapted from Halbach, 1998: 190)