

A Brief Analysis of Teacher Autonomy in Second Language Acquisition

Hui Yan

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China 266061

Email: magyan@sohu.com

Abstract—By examining the concept of teacher autonomy, the author intends to analyze its definitions, characteristics, and its relationship with learner autonomy so as to offer some insight to learner autonomy and facilitate the second language acquisition(SLA).

Index Terms—teacher autonomy, definitions, characteristics, relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing prominence of learner autonomy in second language acquisition(SLA), teacher autonomy as a new concept in understanding learner autonomy has been paid more attention to. The discussion of teacher autonomy has already become a major emerging concern at various conferences about learner autonomy such as the 1999 AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy Symposium in Tokyo and the Symposium in Singapore in December 2002. Therefore, the analysis of teacher autonomy will be of great help to the understanding of learner autonomy and the facilitation of SLA.

II. TEACHER AUTONOMY

A. Definitions

Little(1995) first defines teacher autonomy as the “teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching.”¹ After that, scholars have been trying to define teacher autonomy from different aspects. Aoki’s (2000) offers an explicit definition of teacher autonomy, suggesting that this involves ‘the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one’s own teaching’². According to Richard Smith(2000), teacher autonomy refers to “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others.” Benson (2000) argues that teacher autonomy can be seen as “a right to freedom from control (or an ability to exercise this right) as well as actual freedom from control”.

Nevertheless, these definitions focus on the ability of teachers, failing to point out the dynamic relationship between the teacher and learners. The ability of these learners may influence the teacher’s capacity of managing their knowledge, skills and even attitudes, and vice versa. Therefore, the author puts forward her point of view on teacher autonomy. It means the capacity of teachers in managing knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the students’ acquisition of a language with regard to learners.

B. Characteristics

Researchers have been analyzing teacher autonomy from different dimensions. McGrath (2000) illustrates the characteristics of teacher autonomy from two dimensions, “as self-directed action or development; as freedom from control by others.”³ When teachers act in a self-directed manner, they are not guaranteed to learn from the experience. Because their professional development of autonomy could be considered as one form of professional action, but their action and development of autonomy do not necessarily mean the same thing. When teachers make use of their freedom, allowance needs to be made for a distinction between capacity for and/or willingness to engage in self-direction and actual self-directed behavior. In China, for example, some college teachers have the capacity to engage in self-directed activity but refuse to do so for the sake of personal responsibility.

Smith (2001) summarizes six very comprehensive characteristics of teacher autonomy as follows:

- A. Self-directed professional action
- B. Capacity for self-directed professional action
- C. Freedom from control over professional action
- D. Self-directed professional development
- E. Capacity for self-directed professional development
- F. Freedom from control over professional development

This summary has analyzed almost every aspect of teacher autonomy. However, it fails to pay due attention to an important element in teacher autonomy, that is teachers’ attitudes. The subjective element as teacher’s attitudes

determines the successful application of teacher autonomy. Therefore, the author analyzes the divides teacher autonomy from three dimensions, that is the capacity and freedom in knowledge, skills and attitudes. As a result, positive attitudes is the prerequisite to the adoption of teacher autonomy, the capacity and freedom of knowledge is the basis, and the of skills are the necessary tools and guarantees of successful application of teacher autonomy.

C. Teacher Autonomy and Learner Autonomy

It is of vital importance to understand the dynamic relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. They are interrelated and interactive. To put it specifically, in order to understand and instruct learners, teachers become involved in various activities, asking questions which are helpful in increasing students' awareness of autonomous learning. Smith (2001: 43-4) explains explicitly their relationship.

"Teachers also need to constantly reflect on their own role in the classroom, monitoring the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students' thinking and behavior, so as to engage students in autonomous and effective learning"⁸. According to different circumstances, teachers' management of autonomy vary respectively.

However, as Little (1991) points out that learner autonomy does not mean "learning without a teacher (at home, with a computer, in a self-access centre, etc.), and/or that it does away with the need for a teacher"⁸. Instead, learner autonomy concerns a capacity (for taking control of learning) which can be cultivated and explored in a number of ways and situations, especially in the classroom with the help of teacher autonomy. Voller (1997) notes that "if students are to learn to 'take control', the teacher may need to learn to 'let go', even as she provides scaffolding and structure."⁹ Therefore, scholars become more aware of both the importance of developing teacher autonomy in structuring or scaffolding reflective learning and of the complex, shifting interrelationship between teacher and learner roles in the advocating of learner autonomy. As a result, teachers are required to get fully prepared for teacher autonomy

Besides, as Carey emphasizes, teacher autonomy is wrongly "coupled with uniformity"¹⁰. Take China for example, even when teachers are permitted to vary tremendously within the classroom, the bureaucratic evaluation has been demanding restrictions on the teachers' potential of full autonomy. Thus, teachers tend to adopt uniform teaching in order to meet the existing standard of teacher evaluation. Consequently, teacher autonomy has been linked to the same pattern of teaching. Accordingly, Tholin (2009) observes that "The focus here is both on teachers' freedom to redirect their teaching towards self-directed learning and on how their own experiences as autonomous language learners can give character to the teaching that they themselves carry out."¹¹ Therefore, in order to avoid such uniformity teachers' freedom should be taken into serious consideration.

III. CONCLUSION

In short, it is of great necessity to investigate into teacher autonomy if teachers intend to engage successfully in advocating learner autonomy in second language acquisition. As a result, this brief analysis of the definitions and characteristics of teacher autonomy is very helpful to understand learner autonomy and thus to facilitate SLA by consciously developing teachers' capacity and freedom in knowledge, skills and attitudes.

REFERENCES

- [1] Little, D (1995) Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System* 23/2. 175-182.
- [2] Aoki, N. (2000) Aspects of teacher autonomy: Capacity, freedom and responsibility. Paper presented at 2000 Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Language Centre Conference.
- [3] Smith, R.C. (2000) Starting with ourselves: Teacher-learner autonomy in language learning. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 89-99.
- [4] Benson, P. (2001) Teaching and researching autonomy. Language Learning. London: Longman.
- [5] McGrath, I. (2000) Teacher autonomy. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath and T. Lamb (eds.) *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 100-110
- [6] Smith, R.C., with A. Barfield (2001) Interconnections: Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy (in 2 parts). *Language Learning* 7 & 8/1. 5-6.
- [7] Smith, R.C. (2001) Learner and teacher development: Connections and constraints. *The Language Teacher* 25/6: 43-4.
- [8] Little, D. (1991) Learner autonomy : Definitions, issues and problems. Dublin: Authentik.
- [9] Voller, P. (1997) Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning? In P. Benson and P. Voller (eds.) *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. London: Longman. 98-113.
- [10] Carey, Kevin. (2008) The Teacher Autonomy Paradox . *The American Prospect*. September 17.
- [11] Tholin, J . (2009) Learner and Teacher Autonomy: Concepts, Realities, and Responses. *ELT J*. 63: 179-181

Hui Yan was born in Yan'an city, Shaanxi Province, China in 1971. She received her M.A. degree in SLA from Beijing University, China in 2000.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science & Technology, Qingdao, China. Her research interests include SLA and Cross-cultural Communication.

Miss Yan is a member of the Chinese Association of Foreign Language Teachers.