



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**TEACHER AUTONOMY IN PEDAGOGY FOR AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

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(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Islamic University, Bangladesh)<https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2024.11105>**ABSTRACT**

This article delves into the emerging idea of teacher autonomy in language education pedagogy. Even though it is commonly acknowledged that teacher autonomy is essential for professional development and for promoting learner autonomy, the term has proven challenging to define. To provide a more comprehensive grasp of the concept, this article compiles the various definitions of teacher autonomy offered by various authors. While doing so, it seeks to demonstrate the significance of educating educators on the value of learner autonomy-promoting pedagogical techniques and the significance of self-inquiry and reflection for professional growth. This article draws on the research of several scholars to explain why teacher education curricula should incorporate the concept of autonomy.

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**THE ESSENCE OF TEACHER AUTONOMY:**

The self-access language learning institutes in Europe in the early 1970s were the first to spark interest in autonomy as a concept. The importance of fostering learner autonomy has been the subject of an increasing number of studies, both in formal school settings for young learners and in self-access learning facilities for adults, as the student's role in the learning process has come to be recognised as central. At first, many were curious about the definition of autonomy and why it is so vital for students to have it. After that, many started to wonder how a teacher should function in a classroom where students are expected to actively participate in their education. The emphasis shifted from alternative learning environments and methods to the "underlying attributes that would allow teachers to engage in pedagogies for autonomy in the classroom" (Benson and Huang, 2001, p. 427) as it became increasingly clear that simply reimagining the teacher's role in the classroom would not be sufficient to foster student agency.

In the mid-1990s, David Little (2001) introduced the idea of teacher autonomy to the field of language instruction. Successful educators, according to Little, are always self-reliant in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploring the freedom that this confers. "Unless we put teachers centre-stage, I doubt that our efforts to promote pedagogy for autonomy in schools will ever have any sustainable effects (Little, 2001, p. 179)" This highlights the continued significance of teachers

despite the shifting focus on student agency in the classroom (Vieira, 2011, p. 21). The realisation that bound up not only with the learners but also the teachers own learning and teaching experiences and their beliefs started to take shape as a result.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING:

Education has long made use of the idea of autonomy. The works of several academics who have argued for various ideals of education include the germ of the idea of autonomy. The importance of students' independence in their learning has been a central theme in the works of educational thinkers such as Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky.

Rousseau described an approach to teaching that grew out of a young person's "natural impulses and inclinations" (qtd. in Benson, 2001, p.24). The idea that kids should "learn what they want to learn and when they want to learn it" (p. 24) rather than being forced to "master pre-ordained subject-matter" was its foundation. Autonomy is a byproduct of this perspective on schooling. On the other hand, Dewey held the opinion that a child's education cannot occur in a vacuum. Nevertheless, he also firmly believed that each kid is independent and that their own "instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point of all education" (Benson, 2001, p.77), which is then reinforced by the society they are brought up in.

Despite these prior mentions of learner autonomy, the majority of scholars who have investigated the concept have relied on constructivist theory. Candy argues that "knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner" through analysing constructivism in its various forms



(qtd. in Benson, 2001, p.35). A sense of the views expressed by Rousseau and Dewey is being reiterated here. When it comes to language acquisition, Piaget is equally concerned with the learner's intrinsic ability. Moore and Harris note that Piaget saw "language skills as a reflection of a more general underlying competence that manifests itself in various activities including language behaviour" (qtd. in Tort-Moloney, 1997, p.2). Consequently, the constructivist paradigm attributes successful learning to the learners themselves, who actively choose what and how they learn via their interactions with others.

In his work, Vygotsky considers the role of the instructor alongside that of the student. In his revised view of the educator's function, he or she is no longer merely a dispenser of information but rather one who designs experiences where learners are required to examine thinking and learning processes. Tort-Moloney (1997) argues, citing Vygotsky's claim that the classroom fosters "developmental and experiential social processes" (p.21) among students. As a result, there are two main ways in which the constructivist approach affects the educator. On one level, we have the teacher in her transformed role, providing learners with scaffolding to encourage autonomy.

RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF TEACHER AUTONOMY

While the majority of the definitions provided by researchers have focused on students and student autonomy, it is easy to extend these concepts to instructors and instructor autonomy as well; The capacity "for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (qtd. in Tort-

Moloney, 1997, p.14) is what Little means when she says that someone has autonomy. Thus, if "control of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3) is what it means for students to have autonomy, then for teachers, it might imply taking charge of their own professional growth, their learning, and their own teaching. According to Aoki "if learner autonomy is the capacity, freedom, and /or responsibility to make choices concerning one's learning ... teacher autonomy, by analogy, can be defined as the capacity, freedom and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching" ((qtd. in Benson and Huang, 2001, p.78).

Realising that children cannot develop independence apart from their teachers and that teachers cannot encourage independence in their pupils if they don't have it themselves, teacher autonomy emerged as a field of study. Little recognises the interdependence of learner autonomy and instructor autonomy. Teacher autonomy cannot be fostered "if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner" (Little, 2001, p.45), in his view. Educators also need to be capable of "their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning" (p.45). According to Vieira, there is a continuum that includes both learner and teacher autonomy. Autonomy in her pedagogy for autonomy means independence on the part of the instructor and the student. The development of teacher autonomy is not independent from the development of learner autonomy, since one gives meaning to the other.

There are two main aspects of teacher autonomy that McGrath outlines (2000) that among these, "teacher autonomy as self-directed



professional development” (pp.100-101) stands out. He points out that every educator will have their own unique perspective on what it means to grow as an individual. Additionally, keep in mind that teachers need “a certain level of preparedness - attitudinal and technical” (p.101) for their students to be able to build their own skills. Educators must have self-assurance in their abilities to control their students’ learning and in their accomplishments of authority-mandated goals. Not until then can “the teacher be free to focus on self-development” (p.105). To be autonomous as a teacher means to be able to alter one’s pedagogical approach as one sees fit via one’s own contemplation and investigation. Thavenius states that an autonomous teacher is someone “who reflects on her teacher role and who can change it, who can help her learners become autonomous and who is independent enough to let her learners become independent” (qtd. in McGrath, 2000, p.160). Therefore, an independent teacher must be able to reflect on her practice and make judgements about curricular adjustments based on her reflections; she must also be able to foster student autonomy. When a teacher engages in critical reflection, she improves the quality of her own decision-making by ensuring that her modifications are well-informed. Because development does not originate from gut feelings. Richard Smith (2003) asserts that “critical reflection can help teachers move from a level where they may be guided by impulse, intuition or routine to a level where they are guided by reflection and critical thinking” (p.14). In addition to self-reflection, an effective educator must have confidence in her students to empower them to take initiative and succeed.

As for the second aspect, McGrath (2000) mentions “autonomy as freedom from control by others” (p.103). By this, he implies that teachers should be free from the constraints imposed on them by the curriculum, the testing system, and the textbooks. Only when educators are able to direct their own professional growth can they make well-informed decisions on classroom management and the promotion of student agency (Sinclair, 2009, p.184). The ability to make decisions about teaching despite institutional constraints is a more accurate description. In reality, teachers rarely have complete creative control over their lessons; instead, they are often constrained by the wishes of school administrators, curricular mandates, educational policies, and even students’ and parents’ families. Therefore, in order to be self-reliant, educators must find ways to circumvent these limitations. We have recognised both internal and external constraints. A teacher’s internal limitations may be strongly ingrained in her belief systems, making them invisible to her, in contrast to the obvious external constraints. The best way for a teacher to recognise and finally conquer these limitations is to critically reflect on their own teaching approaches.

In order to “develop the ability to improve the conditions of teaching and learning,” as Vieira (2011) puts it, educators must be “willing” and “able” (p.23) to handle these limitations. How a teacher “responds to these constraints” is a crucial factor to examine. No educator is truly autonomous if they blindly follow every directive from on high. However, this does not give educators carte blanche to resist every mandate they encounter. The majority of impositions are not always foolish. Educators are



expected to exercise their judgement in order to “develop a principled strategy that may involve compromise and negotiations in addition to determined autonomous action” (McGrath, 2000, p.102).

Working independently is not the same as teacher autonomy, which emphasises the individual's ability to behave as one sees fit. It can be said here that teacher autonomy is not complete without collaboration and the necessity of discourse. According to Smith (2003) “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others” (p.83) is what teacher-learner autonomy is all about. Thus, the growth of teacher autonomy is characterised by collaborative discourse among educators. Furthermore, the promotion of learner autonomy is not possible in the absence of fostering the Growth of Teacher Autonomy

Little (2001) argues that the nature of the pedagogical dialogue will always be the decisive factor in the development of learner autonomy. Additionally, he states that since learning is characterised by interaction and interdependence, the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers (p.175). This is because neither party can negotiate with the other.

Along with critical reflection and empowerment, discussion is listed as one of the three core values of teacher autonomy in the Shizuoka definition (Barfield et al., 2009) of teacher autonomy. One of the most important values of teacher autonomy, according to the Shizuoka concept, is empowerment. “Empowers teacher

autonomy and helps it develop further” (Barfield et al., 2009) when action research in the classroom incorporates discussion and critical reflection. But, in the realm of education, empowerment also implies a change of authority from the government to the teacher and from the teacher to the student and a potential equalising of the power differentials between them. Teachers should not feel disempowered just because they delegate some authority to their students. According to Lamb (2000), “As with pupils, teachers need to understand the constraints on their practice, but rather than feeling disempowered, they need to empower themselves by finding the spaces and opportunities for maneuver. From the various perspectives on teacher autonomy, one thing stands out: “it seems particularly important that professional freedom should not simply be granted from above; instead, it should be the outcome of processes of professional development” (qtd. in Benson & Huang, 2001, p.431).

Autonomy has always been present in both students and educators. Though a teacher's lessons may follow a predefined curriculum, he says, each teacher brings her unique interpretation of it to the classroom. The growth of teacher autonomy can be understood from this alone. Given that every classroom is unique, it is essential for self-directed educators to regularly assess their own practices and consider how they can foster students' independence in the classroom. Teachers should be introduced to the idea of teacher autonomy in their teacher education programmes, according to researchers in the area of autonomy. The term 'autonomy' may not be used in many teacher education programmes, but according to Smith (2003), the ideas of “reflective



practice and teacher-as-researcher” (p.86) are already there, and these are the fundamental characteristics that help teachers become autonomous. According to Smith (2003) “...reflection by student-teachers or teachers on any aspect of teaching have been promoted for some time now as means for developing teacher autonomy, viewed as the general capacity to self-direct one’s own teaching” (p.87). However, it is insufficient to simply work on instructors’ critical thinking skills. It is possible for educators to grow independent of outside influences while still engaging in critical practice reflection; this does not necessarily equate to autonomy-understanding of their students’ needs. One of the most important aspects of teacher autonomy is the capacity to encourage student autonomy. The function of teacher education programme is crucial in this regard as well. It is unrealistic to expect teachers to know how to foster student agency when they have never learned in a learner-centered classroom. Therefore, it is crucial to provide educators with training on various strategies that foster student agency in the classroom. Having said that, the purpose of teacher preparation programme in this area is to impart rudimentary classroom procedures. What will direct their subsequent actions is reflective thinking.

Awareness training for teachers that incorporates ongoing critical reflections is, hence, her main point. A classroom instructor should not only be aware of her student’s learning process, but also of the significance of her own role. But in general, there will never be a standard set of criteria to determine if a certain educator can be considered independent. There must be tiers of instructor autonomy if there

are tiers of student autonomy. Autonomy is both a conceptual construct and a behaviour at the individual level. There may be a mismatch between a teacher’s self-perception and the degree of autonomy demonstrated in her classroom. Looking at it from a larger angle, a teacher’s ability to exercise autonomy is heavily influenced by the work context in which she finds herself. Every educator has their own set of constraints. There cannot be comparable pressures on a teacher with a class of 25 students and another with 150 students. It is unreasonable to assume that all educators would have the same degree of independence because some schools have restrictions and policies that limit what instructors may do in the classroom. Developing students’ independence in the classroom necessitates a shift in power dynamics that can be difficult for both instructors and students. According to Smith (2003), these methods provide “a challenge to established norms of classroom culture in most institutional learning contexts...” (p.143) due to the changes they imply. Teachers may feel “constrained by a lack of autonomy with regard to institutional requirements and/or the expectations of stakeholders such as parents, other teachers, or administrative authorities” in one situation, and “students may appear reluctant... to take on greater control over classroom learning” in another (Smith, 2003, p.143). For this reason, educators should make every effort to exercise as much autonomy as possible in their professional growth, pedagogical methods, and the promotion of student autonomy within the bounds of their own discretion and judgement, regardless of the limitations placed on them by their employers.



The majority of educators constantly experiment with new ways of teaching. Their perspectives, values, and methods evolve over time regardless of whether they have received instruction in reflective thinking. According to research by Huberman et al., which is cited in Aoki 200, teachers' attitudes and commitments towards teaching might alter throughout their careers. Educating educators programme should incentivize teachers to think critically in order to speed up and improve their own professional development. On top of that, according to autonomy theory, educators should be free to make decisions based on their own best judgment and experience. Within this framework, Benson and Huang (2001) pose the astute question: "Can we assume that educators are always able to use their professional judgement?" (p.433) This concern is understandable, but educators "need to be enabled, through processes of teacher education and development, to exercise professional discretion in ways that will benefit their students' autonomy" (p.433). This highlights the importance of teacher education in fostering autonomy in educators, just as learners require guidance to become self-reliant.

People usually push back against these kinds of efforts. Bobb-Wolff notes: "Many teachers, perhaps do not perceive a need to change the way in which they work because they were successful working this way as students," (qtd. in Vieira, 2011, p.24). A. Some people might think it would require too much mental energy and time to plan and think about, which they just do not have. Another reason some people can be reluctant to attempt anything new is because they are afraid of the unknown or because they are afraid of staying in their "comfort

zone" (p. 24). Therefore, it is crucial to introduce teachers to the pedagogy of autonomy from the start of their careers. Becoming autonomous is a complicated process that requires a rethinking of one's teaching methods, which in turn necessitates ongoing self-reflection and inquiry.

Why Teacher Autonomy Needed

If we accept McGrath's definition of teacher autonomy, then it is reasonable to assume that an autonomous teacher is one who can grow professionally through research-oriented practices and critical reflection, and who can find ways to teach despite institutional, curricular, and other internal and external limitations; however, this does not necessarily mean that these practices help students develop autonomy. Therefore, we return to Little's definition and examine it in greater detail. As we have already established, little considers learner autonomy and teacher autonomy to be mutually supportive notions; in his view, teachers must possess autonomy themselves in order to foster it in their students. Based on this notion, learner autonomy—the primary focus of the researcher—is contingent upon instructor autonomy. I would want to expand on Little's theory by stating that an autonomous teacher is the only one who can truly grasp the significance of fostering student autonomy. When a teacher is self-aware, her own teaching methods will inevitably encourage student autonomy. "What is the point of having a concept of reflective teaching, teacher empowerment or teacher autonomy which can accommodate transmissive, authoritarian, even oppressive purposes?" (Vieira, 2011, p.23) poses a serious question.



To reduce teachers to the level of technicians “whose main professional expertise consists of applying externally produced knowledge...,” as Vieira (2011) puts it, “telling teachers what they should do and think” (p.24) undermines their autonomy as educators. The teacher’s perspective denies the validity of teachers’ practical knowledge and their role as critical intellectuals.

According to Vieira (2011), teachers must be able to “construct educational environments conducive to learner autonomy” (p.23), which means they must be allowed to do what they believe is best for their students. It is essential to encourage students to develop their sense of autonomy, and a teacher who is capable of doing so herself will know how to do just that.

Demotivation among educators is another factor that highlights the need for teacher autonomy. Most teachers keep quiet when they have anything to say because they know their voices will likely go unheard. Vieira (2011), on the other hand, claims “when there is a support group where professional knowledge is built from ...collaborative action-research, self-assertiveness and self- confidence is expected to arise...” (p. 34). That information alone has the potential to inspire educators. In their definition of autonomy, Lamb and Vieira stress the importance of society. The concept of autonomy encompasses the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in educational environments. Teachers’ membership in a professional community instills a sense of self-awareness that helps them strike a

balance between autonomy and accountability, regardless of their own values and worldviews.

CONCLUSION

Autonomy pedagogy places an emphasis on self-awareness. Teachers must be made aware of the significance of their professional autonomy, both as a means to encourage learner autonomy and as an end in itself. Since teachers are already facing limitations in their professional development, it is up to them to figure out how to overcome these obstacles so that they can enhance their teaching methods by giving students more agency in their learning and, in turn, boost their own sense of value and intrinsic motivation.

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