Teachers, Facilitation and Autonomy

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Overview
- Background
  - Autonomy module in MA in Applied Linguistics at University of Hong Kong
  - Teachers as facilitators
- Constraints to teacher autonomy
  - Perverse incentives, policy, institutional, conceptions of language, and language teaching methodologies
- Exam Constraints
  - Students have rigid expectations for passing exams and examinations
- Exam Constraints
  - Assessments must be standardized and objective

The Literature
- First, can the teacher be alert to and enable opportunities in the classroom process which explicitly foster the attributes of Being Autonomous? Secondly, can teachers exercise these characteristics in their own professional life? The third and final question seems to us to be a central feature of effective facilitation - can teachers help learners exercise these characteristics in their own professional life? In other words, can we truly say that we have reached the state where teachers are autonomous agents within their teaching environment? (Benson, 2000: 148)

The Literature
- Constraints attributed to learners
  - Attitudes
- Constraints attributed to the working environment:
  - Teachers, policies, and the student body
  - Exams and past papers
- Constraints attributed to exams
  - Tests and evaluation

The Participants
- Autonomy module in MA in Applied Linguistics at University of Hong Kong
- 20 participants - teachers in secondary schools, community colleges and universities

Exam Constraints
- Failures in the Certificate Level Exam, presented them from getting into mainstream grammar schools to study Form 6. [so] my students are far more exam-oriented than I am. They have just gone through a public exam the year before and they have very little regard for how they perform in the coming A-Level examination. They expect me to teach them how to pass exams and practice past papers... They don't mind being drilled to exam techniques in class and actually they expect teachers to do so.

Sandy (community college, pre-associate degree programme)
### Exam Constraints
- I find I am under huge pressure to ‘teach’ to the examination curriculum. In fact, teachers in Hong Kong seem to be working under the curriculum ‘pyramid’. As McGrath (2000) puts it, we are operating under a ‘triangular structure of syllabus, examination, and textbook.’ Teachers seem to be bound in the classroom.

### Syllabus Constraints
- The curriculum and schedules in my school are very tight. The curriculum and schedules in my school are very tight. It does not leave room for the fostering of autonomy in the classroom. For lower form students, we just have three weeks to finish a unit on average, and we have to cover quite a number of grammar topics. We need to finish all exercises from the workbook, grammar book and labelling book, dictation and comprehension every week. Most of the students do not understand things we teach in such a tight schedule. Actually, we do not have time to cover everything in the curriculum. This curriculum is too narrow for the meager best but the book inspection. For example, it says 4.5 340 paragraphs, 3-4 past papers in listening and 3-4 units from the course book used.

### Institutional Constraints
- The Senior English Panel at the beginning of the academic year gives the syllabus which just specifies the number of units to be completed at the end of the academic term and the topics that need to be covered. It does not leave room for the fostering of autonomy in the classroom. For lower form students, we just have three weeks to finish a unit on average, and we have to cover quite a number of grammar topics. We need to finish all exercises from the workbook, grammar book and labelling book, dictation and comprehension every week. Most of the students do not understand things we teach in such a tight schedule. Actually, we do not have time to cover everything in the curriculum. This curriculum is too narrow for the meager best but the book inspection. For example, it says 4-5 340 paragraphs, 3-4 past papers in listening and 3-4 units from the course book used.

### Teacher Roles
- The hierarchical structures of schools can also pose considerable threats to teachers. The teachers are often the only people in the school who are responsible for the day-to-day teaching and learning. They are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators’. Teachers are expected to take so many roles apart from ‘knowledge transmitters or facilitators'. As class teachers, we are ‘parents’, ‘supervisors’, ‘resources’, ‘discipline masters’, ‘emotional care-takers’, ‘tutors’, and so on, of a class of forty students. As language teachers, we are responsible to teach 120 students in 30 lessons per cycle, which are about 6-8 this 6 lessons every day. We are also responsible to those who are not doing well in the class and not achieving the best in their studies. As language teachers, we are responsible to teach 120 students in 30 lessons per cycle, which are about 6-8 this 6 lessons every day. We are also responsible to those who are not doing well in the class and not achieving the best in their studies. As language teachers, we are responsible to teach 120 students in 30 lessons per cycle, which are about 6-8 this 6 lessons every day. We are also responsible to those who are not doing well in the class and not achieving the best in their studies. As language teachers, we are responsible to teach 120 students in 30 lessons per cycle, which are about 6-8 this 6 lessons every day. We are also responsible to those who are not doing well in the class and not achieving the best in their studies. As language teachers, we are responsible to teach 120 students in 30 lessons per cycle, which are about 6-8 this 6 lessons every day. We are also responsible to those who are not doing well in the class and not achieving the best in their studies.
Teacher Roles

- We are essentially the brokers/making examination papers, marking assignments, evaluating students’ learning progress and learning outcomes in order to ensure good public examination results, as well as the school’s survival.

- Since most parents have to work late, students become distant from parents and are expected to be independent in their daily lives.

- Before taking the MA I used to believe that a good teacher is merely a transmission teacher. I taught students to reflect on what skills they have possessed or evaluate by themselves what skills are conducive to their own learning. I did not allow them to explore their own world of knowledge and skills.

- I should be aware that I myself am a language learner. With this in mind, I should know that my own learning experience shaped my views on language and the language learning process. But this experience may not work on everyone else. For example, my passion for learning languages has been the driving force behind my decision to adopt a different approach to teach students.

- What it really comes down to is what we emphasize in our teaching. If what is emphasized is accuracy, grammar and memorization, students will probably have less control over their language learning. Clearly, teachers need to let go of results-driven teaching and work on everyone else. For example, my passion for learning languages has been the driving force behind my decision to adopt a different approach to teach students.

- Tackling students’ disciplinary problems has been most teachers’ fundamental goal which occupies most of our time and burns our educational spirit. Also, teachers’ non-teaching workload has soared every year. Together with heavy marking loads and more preparation for public exam classes, language teachers are both physically and mentally exhausted. To save time, most of us adopt the traditional knowledge-transmission teaching approach to teach students.

Teacher Roles

- I thought I was fostering autonomy in my students. However, from constant reflection during this course, I was astonished to have found myself being very dictatorial. I can no longer deny that I am merely a transmission teacher. I taught language grammar may not be possessed by my students, learning grammar may not be possessed or evaluated by themselves what skills are conducive to their own learning. I did not allow them to explore their own world of knowledge and skills.

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Teacher Collaboration

> Teachers teaching the same form do not meet on a regular basis to discuss issues related to teaching and learning and also by and large there is no sharing of resources though since last year effort is being made to establish a centralized resource pool but with not much success as teachers generally do not like to share their ideas or resources.

(Geetha - EMI band 1)

Teacher Roles

> All English teachers put lots of effort in preparing teaching materials and worksheets for grammar items we have to cover, and making students understand. Our English role as teachers have changed from English transmission rather than used, despite important as subjects like Physics, Mathematics etc. for getting admission into universities. Their interest in importance of English for communicative purposes outside the classroom. But I think that the best way is to get high paying attention in the last few months and in many cases learning English is the waste of time.

(Christine - CMI band 3)

Learner Roles

> Yet, whilst students in Hong Kong work in environments with an endless supply of English materials, decision making opportunities for secondary school students are embarrassingly absent. In language learning, competition in the classroom with no recognition of learner differences, preferred leaning styles or the strengths and weaknesses of individuals. As teachers, it is our job to fight against the intimidation of our environment. Group work and collaborative learning can allow students to think ideas and work out solutions for themselves. This may free students from the need to have their ideas validated by a teacher.

(Sandy - community college, pre-associate degree)

Learner Attitudes

> Most regard English as any other subject that should be learnt through teachers transmission rather than used, despite acknowledging the need to learn it. Students develop a sense of detachment from English and lack awareness of the importance of English for communicative purposes outside the classroom.

(Karina - CMI band 3)

Learner Constraints

> Most of my students are not proficient in English. They find it hard to read, write, listen and speak in English. They are not confident at it. They always depend on their teachers when they learn. They have no ideas of what and how they are going to learn. They are unable to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning process and progress. They are actually unable to take control of their learning. They lack the strategies and confidence needed for autonomous learning. Nor are they proficient enough to do assessment and reflection themselves as well.

(Helen - tertiary)

Teacher Collaboration

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Learner Roles

> Part of the reason why they put English on the lowest rung of the ladder is the perception that languages are not as important as subjects like Physics, Mathematics etc. for getting admission into universities. Their interest in importance of English for communicative purposes outside the classroom. But I think that the best way is to get high paying attention in the last few months and in many cases learning English is the waste of time.

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Learner Roles

> Whilst students are often keen to express themselves, it may be the education system itself that suppresses their freedom, requiring them to engage in content-heavy learning, necessitating time-saving strategies such as rote-learning, deterring themselves from learning that promotes self-development and skills building.

(Caroline - secondary)

Learner Attitudes

> Despite the positive environment for autonomy, my students are not adequately prepared to negotiate the syllabus with us. One major problem is that they do not have the confidence that they can decide what they want to learn. Some of my students even tell me that they don’t think they should have anything to do with the syllabus until a teacher gives them the marks. As teachers, we assume that our students are confident enough to shift our control of learning to them strongly believe that doing past papers in all the subjects, including English, is the best way to get high marks.

(Eugene - EMI band 3)

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(Karina - CMI band 3)
In a culture that relies heavily on the teacher’s authority in making judgments and evaluating students’ performance, I sometimes find it very difficult to introduce collaborative evaluation into the classroom. For example, students may think that if the teacher asks students to evaluate their or their classmates’ work, the teacher is being lazy.

Learning from one another

I have learnt to step back and let students take more responsibility for their own learning. For example, during the peer evaluation process of the individual presentation sessions, although I was eager to hear their ideas, I realized that the students were not able to express themselves properly. To help them, I have arranged students in writing groups and I will help the group have to agree on a topic they want to work on and share some ideas about the topic. Students will need to negotiate with each other, work together for mutual benefit and take shared responsibility for their own learning.

Learning from one another

This sort of presentation is just a small step towards achieving autonomy in my class. But there are a number of important benefits. First, there is a fundamental change in the role of teachers and learners. If learners have to take part in any process of decision making, they may be much more interested and committed to their own learning needs.

Group work and negotiation

I will arrange students in writing groups and rather than provide them with a writing topic to write on each time, I will give the writing groups a list of writing topics to choose from. I will also encourage them to negotiate with each other, work together and come out with the best work that everyone in mind or they would like to write on. As the groups have to agree on a topic, people want to write on and share some ideas about the topic, students will need to negotiate with each other, work together for mutual benefit and take shared responsibility for their own learning.

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Projects

We have adopted an interesting project cross-curricular project on Ethics and English. It offers a perfect opportunity for autonomous learning. It seems that autonomy cannot merely happen in the classroom. Autonomy needs to be prepared for. There is no such thing as accepting, and the way of adopting it and the ability to make changes. I have used this project to train my learners to be more responsible and responsive to their own learning needs.

Projects

The school has recognized the importance of self-directed learning and since the past two years has made it one of the school themes along with self-discipline. However, the school is not taking any constructive measures to create an awareness of what self-directed learning is. As a result, self-directed learning is not interpreted as a going student’s responsibility. Projects in self-directed work and the peer are Form 1. Students in the project are required to present their papers on different topics in seven different subjects. Though project learning is aimed at promoting self-directed learning, without proper planning, it is more likely to be just downloading, cutting and pasting of information than autonomous learning.
Extensive reading

Adjustment is still possible if I am bold enough to replace the slow, month-by-month book report system with a much more autonomous plan. This plan could be designed between learners and me, taking into account the number of books to be read, the form of assignments (if any) and the assessment as well. If not so radical as to cancel all book reports, perhaps I can negotiate with learners on the type and number of assignments to be included. The number of books to be read by learners can also be flexible. Learners can bring in more books or change their storage any time they like. Learners can be invited to judge each other’s book reports and choose the best ones which will then be rewarded. (MeiMei –– secondary)

Reflective Journals

The reflective journal records I collected after each session provided me with immediate feedback on my teaching... I was often amazed at how observant my students could be when judging the learning value of class activities and the way I conducted my lessons. Joanne’s students showed awareness of learning styles, greater use of metalanguage, and awareness of learning process. (Joanne (tertiary, student teachers. Joanne’s students showed awareness of learning styles, greater use of metalanguage, and awareness of learning process)

Concluding Remarks

Negotiation – its centrality to learner autonomy in the classroom (see Breen and Littlejohn 2000)

Projects – possibly the best way to foster autonomy in the HK context

Recent examples of success:

Christine Cheung (2005)
Regina Leung (2005)