

Pedagogy of autonomy for difficult circumstances: from practice to principles

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This article sets out to consider the place of learner autonomy in an African context by recounting the first author's experience of teaching a very large class of more than two hundred teenage learners in an under-resourced secondary school setting in Cameroon. It describes the essentially pragmatic solution he adopted in this context of engaging pupils in group work under trees outside, having negotiated rules and work plans. The subsequent value of creative writing activities is also emphasised given the lack of textbooks in this context. On the basis of this narrative, we shed new light on issues in language learner autonomy including the cross-cultural relevance of autonomy, the distinction between a pedagogy *of* and a pedagogy *for* autonomy, and how a pedagogy of autonomy can be an appropriate response to otherwise 'difficult circumstances'. The article ends with a number of principles derived from this practice which may equally be of broader relevance in the field of learner autonomy. Overall, the article is structured in an original manner which is presented as a possible model for future collaborative reports of bottom-up language teaching inquiry, in that an author's narrative of teaching experience is foregrounded and only subsequently related to (autonomy) theory.

Keywords: Africa; learner autonomy; pedagogy for autonomy; pedagogy of autonomy; appropriate methodology; teaching in difficult circumstances

Introduction

This article addresses several issues which have not previously been considered in the field of learner autonomy, including:

- The distinction between a pedagogy *of* and a pedagogy *for* autonomy
- The relevance of learner autonomy in an African school setting
- Pedagogy of autonomy as an appropriate response to 'difficult circumstances'

We discuss these issues in relation to a narrative account of one English teacher's practice (that of Kuchah Kuchah, the first author of this article) in a school setting in Cameroon.

While we frame this account from an autonomy perspective, we wish to emphasize that Kuchah's practice arose with *no* prior knowledge on his part of the notion of learner autonomy. Together, we theorized the story with reference to the concept of autonomy much later on,¹ rather than this being a case of a teacher referring to and incorporating autonomy theory *into* practice.

To reflect this reality, we therefore begin our article with the story of practice itself – 'Kuchah's story' – which we have distilled from a series of conversations recorded and transcribed originally for a longer descriptive and analytical account (Kuchah and Smith in

process).² Only after telling this story do we engage in theoretical discussion, bringing in relevant sources of insight from the literature. By foregrounding Kuchah's experience in this manner, we wish to show how an abstract, 'academic' notion of autonomy does not need to be seen as primary, that is, as an ideal that teachers should be called upon, in top-down fashion, to pursue, promote, or 'implement' into practice and whose achievement may be hindered by various constraints. Instead, we shall be viewing matters from a relatively bottom-up, classroom angle, emphasizing that a *pedagogy of autonomy* should perhaps be seen, first and foremost, as a pragmatic, eminently *practical* strategy for addressing problems posed by teaching in 'difficult circumstances'.

Kuchah's story

Background

In 2000, Kuchah had the opportunity to take up part-time teaching in a secondary school in the Far-North province of Cameroon. This was a French-medium secondary school, where he was to teach English language as a subject in the curriculum. The total enrolment of the school was 2,300 students distributed into 20 classrooms making an average of 110 students per class, although this number varied according to level and (in the upper classes) subject area. For a teacher trained at university in Yaoundé in the tradition of communicative language teaching and indoctrinated in the importance of classroom interaction and learner-centred pedagogy, dealing with such large classes was, to say the least, a challenge. Besides, the theory he had been exposed to in his training was developed in, and imported from relatively well-resourced western contexts. Initially, however, he was less concerned about the student numbers and other difficulties than he was interested in having an opportunity to teach teenagers, whom he considered likely to be more enthusiastic and flexible than the older students he had hitherto been working with.

Kuchah's students were adolescents, most of them between the ages of 16 and 17, with a few slightly below or above this age range. He entered his class on the first day full of enthusiasm and with a determination to use his skills to make his French-speaking learners perfect speakers of English. But it was not long before three things pushed him back: the size and practical disposition of the classroom, the lack of textbooks, and the almost unbearable temperature.

An overcrowded classroom!

The class referred to in this story was made up of 235 students, some of whom had no space to sit inside the classroom and as such were literally hanging in through the windows from both sides of the classroom. Kuchah was left with less than a metre between the front benches and the chalkboard, so that he could barely turn round and write on the board. Benches were arranged in rows with space between each row for teacher and students to walk in and out of the class. But Kuchah's class had no luxury of space since many more students needed to be sitting in class than there was space for. So his students usually came early in order to have space in the class and latecomers either stayed outside, listening through the windows, or stole in through one of the windows to squeeze themselves into some standing space at the back. This meant that each time a latecomer stole into the class, Kuchah had to leave some time for the laughter this caused to die down before continuing with the lesson. In a context where the syllabus is basically examination-centred and where the teacher's work is measured by the number of textbook units he has covered within a given period, this kind of

time-wasting can be very disruptive. Yet Kuchah had no choice but to accommodate to the situation.

It was clear to him from the very first day that all the group and pair work language activities he had envisaged were not going to work, and that he needed to think seriously about how to go about things. His wonderful ideas about communicative language teaching, his interactive activities certainly seemed to have their place elsewhere! Observing his other colleagues, teachers of History, Science, and so on, Kuchah discovered that they basically dictated notes which students copied, and gave a few explanations in the process. He reflected that dictating notes would certainly not work for him, given that English was a foreign language to these students. A way out seemed to be to resort to a teacher-centred practice focusing more on grammar and vocabulary, providing rules and giving practice exercises from the textbook.

Lack of textbooks

At the time he was making up his mind that a teacher-centred approach was the best solution for him to handle the classroom size, another reality presented itself: the lack of textbooks. Kuchah realised that in a class of 235 students, not more than 20 students had the prescribed textbook. This, of course was not surprising, given the poverty level of this area, similar to that in most sub-Saharan countries. Focusing therefore on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension drawn from the textbook and hoping that exercises in the course book would help his students consolidate the lessons was therefore unrealistic.

How could he bring them to read the texts that highlighted, amongst other things, the target vocabulary and grammar when they did not have books? He was aware that he would be judged by the number of units of the course book he had covered, but how could he go about 'covering' course book units when his students had no course books to work from? Initially, he gave his students a deadline before which they had to force their parents to buy the books. He stopped students who had no course book from attending his lessons and found himself with less than 10 percent of his students. Then, instead, he encouraged them to borrow course books from students in other schools, but this too did not help. During a trip to Yaoundé, he even obtained permission from the authors of the prescribed textbook for his students to photocopy the books. Then he negotiated for cheap photocopying facilities from road side photocopy shops and asked his students to photocopy a few important pages of the book each time there was a class. But this worked only for a few weeks with a very small number of students and the initial problem never seemed to change. So it dawned on him that his destiny as a teacher here was bound to be a disaster!

The heat

The north of Cameroon is constantly threatened by the insurgence of the Sahara desert, with temperatures going up to 48° Celsius between March and June. Coming from the less hot southern part of Cameroon this temperature was unusual for Kuchah and although he had spent a few years already in the province, it was still difficult to stand such high temperatures. What made things worse was the fact that he had to stand this kind of temperature with more than two hundred students stuffed in a small classroom and, like their teacher, suffocating under the combined burden of heat, body odour from sweat and English! He developed the habit of attending more to those students who were standing by the windows because by the very fact that they were not sitting down in the classroom, they were naturally disadvantaged. Another private reason, however was that the unbearable heat in the classroom drove him

towards the windows, where he could get some fresh air without giving his students the impression that he was unable to stand the heat.

Traditional teaching – the only solution?

With three imposing realities weighing on him, namely, large class size, lack of textbooks and adverse climatic conditions and with the constraints of an administrative supervision based on course book coverage and having observed other colleagues, Kuchah decided on the most manageable approach he could conceive. He focused on grammar and vocabulary with a bit of reading comprehension. He taught the students all the grammar rules in the textbook and he and the students made sentences orally. Sometimes, he copied out exercises on the board and students copied them and provided answers in their exercise books. He tried to dictate notes to them once or twice but, because of their low proficiency in English, he was forced into writing notes on the board for them to copy. Then students all read the exercises aloud, giving answers. Kuchah taught vocabulary items in isolation, encouraging students to use them in sentences. They read whole texts aloud, one student after the other, and tried as much as they could to share the few available course books amongst groups of students. Then students read comprehension questions aloud and provided answers orally. Kuchah also taught them some expressions used when writing an argumentative essay and these were practised orally.

Dwindling enthusiasm

Initially, Kuchah's strategy seemed to work because at least a good number of his students tried to make sentences in class. But it was clear to him that this would not be useful to them in their day-to-day communication outside the classroom. This realisation was in a sense imposed upon him when, one day, his best student, in a bid to impress him by showing him how 'Anglo-Saxon' he had become, made the following sentence:

“Please sir, I was flabbergasted to esteem and impetus for a fortnight however my teacher”.

As Kuchah came to understand later, this student had intended to tell him that he was surprised to have seen him out at night a few days before. His sentence was a strong message to Kuchah, as was the following excerpt from an argumentative essay written by a group of his students:

I think that monogamy is better than polygamy. However, some men marry more than one wife. Thus, they can be as happy as a king. Therefore, they should marry many wives. Nevertheless, it is good to marry one wife. Consequently, you will be happier.

It became clear to him that stuffing students' heads with high-sounding vocabulary in the hope that this would raise their self-esteem as language users is far from being useful in foreign language learning. In using a more traditional approach to teaching, in focusing on grammar and vocabulary, he was only helping to frustrate both his students and himself. There was a general awareness amongst his students and himself that although they could make correct grammatical sentences, they were unable to communicate coherently and sensibly in English. His approach had not helped them in any way to achieve their purpose for learning English, namely to be able to read, understand and talk about texts and day-to-day events in English as well as to pass their examinations.

A turning point

The realisation that he had been wasting his time with these learners was probably more frustrating for Kuchah than it was to his learners. He knew deep down that these students were never, in their present state, going to pass an English language examination. So he decided to focus more on developing their interest in English in the hope that this would enable them to learn in their own way. He was going to let them do what they wanted – after all there was nothing more to lose. He decided, then, that he wanted to follow their will and way by allowing them to learn the way they wanted.

The only possibility open to Kuchah, then, was to talk with them, to listen to them and to ask further questions about what they thought he could possibly do to help them in their studies. But he could not talk to or listen to 235 students in one class, so he decided to attempt a creative writing activity, firstly because creative writing is his hobby, but also because he thought it was less threatening than asking them to write about their likes and dislikes in relation to the English class.

Working with names

First, Kuchah and his students had a discussion about names. He found out the origins and/or meanings of the names of some great African/Afro-American heroes. After telling them about these people, their names and their deeds (and misdeeds), students were identified who had the same first names as these heroes and they were asked to reflect on whether or not they shared the same vision of life as the heroes.

Then Kuchah talked about the origin of his ‘English name’, Harry, and his other names, Kuchah Kuchah. He related his English name to people like Harry Potter and Harry Truman and talked about all the great things he had in common with these people, exaggerating at some points and eliciting students’ reaction, which was generally against his claims. But the atmosphere was light and positive and he agreed with them when they denied some of his claims to greatness, making sure that he made statements that showed that he was conscious of his weaknesses as a human. Then he talked about his surname and about his late grandfather, whose name, Kuchah, his family had adopted as family name and how he had also received his given name, Kuchah, from his grandfather. He was a popular traditional healer and magician loved and respected especially by the women of the clan for his generosity. He told them how he had inherited his grandfather’s greatness and how his generosity with marks made him the students’ favourite teacher. They all shouted against this claim to generosity and told Kuchah what they thought about him. After an interesting debate, mostly in English with occasional French words, one student gave a summary description of the teacher in the following way: “Mr Kuchah Kuchah is friendly and firm”. This rather poetic statement triggered his penchant for poetry so he picked up on it, and, commenting on her poetic strengths, diverted the subject to poetic creativity.

Using acrostics

He instantly conceived a few acrostic lines with his name, Kuchah, wrote them on the board and asked his students to read quietly and tell him if he was right about the way he saw himself in the poem:

King of the grass fields
Umbrella of the homeless
Caring for little Premiere students
Happy noise makers
Acting their joys in class
How I wish to be like you.

The reaction to this was as strong as before, with all students agreeing to their classmate's description of him as 'friendly and firm'. In this respect, they agreed in part to the first line of his poem which described him as 'King of the grass fields' (lion), not because he was great, but because he was strict and therefore as 'aggressive' as the lion. There were many examples from his students of instances where he had acted aggressively and all in the class laughed. At the end of this class, Kuchah asked the students if they would like to each write a poem about their names and bring them to class for analysis, to which they agreed. So it was that the menu for the next class was decided both by Kuchah and his students. As it was the last lesson for the afternoon, he walked part of the way home with a group of students going in his direction. The journey home took a bit longer than usual because they all walked slowly and 'argued' all the way about some of the things they had said about their names and themselves. For the first time, Kuchah felt a kind of closeness with his learners that comes naturally out of learner satisfaction. He impatiently waited for the next class, which was to be in two days.

The next class was as animated as the previous one. Kuchah's students read out interesting things about their names. A few students were encouraged by their peers or by him to read their 'poems' in class, and these generated a lot of discussion, with students agreeing to or disagreeing with some of the things their classmates said about themselves. At the end of the class, Kuchah collected all the students' writings and read them at home.

Engaging in a dialogue

Listening to their poems, observing them defend their claims in class, reading the poems at home and re-examining each student in the light of what they had written turned out to be a good way for Kuchah to understand his students better. The poems he had heard or read gave him a basis upon which to theorise about their behaviour. He came to understand that students had strong self-esteem that was important to sustain as a form of motivation. They were individuals with different needs and different expectations, yet they had a strong sense of belonging to the whole group. He decided therefore to transform his next class into a meeting where students could discuss common problems with his teaching and their learning. He started the meeting by telling them that through their poems, he had come to understand them better. He apologised for not having tried to understand them before then, explaining that the size of the class and the noise they often made were frustrating. He told them of the many interesting activities he had planned for them but could not carry out because of the class size and lack of resources. When he had praised their participation in the last few classes and assured them that he was sure they could do better, he asked them to be honest and tell him how they wanted him to proceed with the English lessons. A good number of them complained about the way all their teachers (including Kuchah) treated them as if they were not human; how teachers looked for the least opportunity to punish, how they did not bother whether students understood the lessons or not, how they got frustrated trying to follow teachers' speed and how Kuchah was unfair with students who came early to sit in class, paying more attention to the latecomers outside by the windows. No matter what

explanation he gave, emotions were quite strong on this until a suggestion came from the class that lessons could be organized outside. This was very quickly acclaimed and before Kuchah could comment, suggestions kept coming on where and how such classes would be organised. The class had gone an hour beyond closing time and the discussion was still going on when Kuchah suggested that all should stop and think about it at home.

In the second meeting on the subject, Kuchah explained that it was not possible for him to talk to 235 students at the same time outside, and that he could not possibly manage their noise or response to distractions outside. But none of the students would agree with him. They all threw in promises for good behaviour and discipline, in response to which he asked for evidence of their commitment to be well-behaved. Some students proposed that rules and regulations should be drawn up for the English class and sanctions stated for anybody who violated them. The immediate general approval here made Kuchah suspect that his students had been thinking of this long before they ever raised it! And so it was that after two sessions of deliberation on the subject, students and teacher came to the decision that English language classes were to be held outside the classroom, in the shade provided by trees.

Drawing up a contract

Agreement having been reached that English classes were to be held outside, the next thing was to discuss the dynamics of such classes. It was agreed that Monday and Friday sessions, being the last for the day would be held outside while the Wednesday class would be an indoor session. It was also agreed that students would be split into groups of ten students each and that the class prefect and other selected students were to help coordinate the groups. Kuchah did not interfere initially with the formation of the groups, but later insisted that the most active students be spread across the groups. Then students set out to discuss the rules and regulations which were to be presented to him on the next Monday, with the signature of every class member. Here, Kuchah's contribution was only one rule: that they would make an effort to speak mostly in English. When students finally presented their rules and regulations to him on Monday, his proposal had been incorporated and a sanction had been added that transgressors would have one of their shoes taken off for the whole day. The rules and regulations were written in French so that everyone would understand them. Each group leader had a copy, which they applied to the letter for the first few sessions before Kuchah encouraged them to be less stringent.

Finding materials

As it was not possible for his students to buy the prescribed textbook, Kuchah encouraged them to find any written or audio material in English and bring it to the class. Students agreed and committed themselves to achieving this. The school had a radio cassette player but no video equipment, so asking students to bring video material would have been unrealistic. This meant that Kuchah had to be flexible and creative in terms of finding alternative ways of attaining curriculum objectives without using the prescribed course books.

Each student bringing material to him had to explain why they thought the material would be useful for the English class and this meant they had to participate in setting learning objectives for their own materials. In general, students brought poems, short stories and news items cut out from newspapers. Youth and women's magazines were very popular, but there were also series from humour magazines and adverts, slogans from billboards and leaflets about medication. There were also health brochures about HIV/Aids, water sanitation and

malaria prevention. Audio material included recordings of news on national and provincial radio, and other English language programmes on local radio. Some students recorded interviews with Anglophones living in Maroua town on different aspects of the cultures of the Anglophone provinces and brought them to class. Some used these interviews to write about these cultures in a bid to show off that they were conversant with the target cultures and could therefore pass for Anglophones. The list of materials they brought was long, varied and surprising to Kuchah. Yet he was happy with his new role of editor and coordinator.

Kuchah took on the responsibility of typing out selected texts, which were then presented to group leaders by the student who provided the material himself or herself. Then the student and Kuchah together set specific activities that each group had to carry out within a given time frame. Most often an activity or task was given to more than one group so that at the end of that activity, members of groups sharing the same task could move to the other groups to compare their findings and report to the rest of the class. Where there was disagreement between or within groups, Kuchah was called in to arbitrate. The dynamics of the classroom changed significantly because there was a new focus on what was of interest to students rather than to the teacher. At the end of every lesson, each group (or group of groups) read out or otherwise reported to the class what they had learnt from their activity and provided key points for their classmates to note. As the activities were as varied as students' interests, different outcomes were achieved in the different groups, ranging from explanations of grammar and vocabulary rules that students derived from texts to grammar and vocabulary rules in context, to short stories, cartoon strips, leaflets for new medications students 'invented', newspaper reports, songs and many other creative texts produced by students in their different groups or individually (in Kuchah and Smith (in process) we aim to present further examples of students' creative work). From these, Kuchah and the students selected the best products for 'publication' on the wall of the classroom and referred to them during in-class sessions.

One example, selected for presentation here because of the impact it has had across Cameroon over the years especially in the English clubs of some schools, is this song, which one of Kuchah's female students wrote for the class, based on her exploration of Michael Jackson's song, 'Heal the World'.

*Come today
Join our English Class
In order to be bilingual in the future
There is only one way
Just to be a good Cameroonian
Make a better choice and join us today*
(Dikobe Blandine PA4)

*Heal the World
Make it a better place
For you and for me and the entire human race
There are people dying
If you care enough for the living
Make a better place for you and for me*
(Michael Jackson)

Challenges of innovation

The experience described above went on for a period of three years with different successes and challenges. The claim is not being made here that all was rosy from the very start. Mention must be made of the fact that even after a ‘contract of good behaviour’ had been drawn up, it was difficult, initially, for students to overcome what seemed to be a natural propensity to be distracted by the slightest thing that the outdoor class brought with it. But more difficult to grapple with was the initial reaction of the school administration, which saw this kind of practice as unconventional and therefore unreliable. It is very difficult for a teacher working within a context where administrative decisions override pedagogic reality to depart from what is believed to be the traditional way of doing things. The administration believed that studying outside the classroom was counter-productive, especially for the purpose of discipline. Kuchah is not sure he ever convinced the administration about his ‘new’ pedagogy, but the relationship he had built with the entire school community, as manager of school football and volleyball teams and as an active member of the staff social committee certainly militated positively for him and, in an important way, prevented an open conflict with the administration. Besides, his students’ change of attitude towards English as well as their more constant interaction in English around the school and with other English teachers in the school helped dissipate some of the doubts about his practice. Colleagues began to refer to his class as ‘la colonie de Kuchah’ (Kuchah’s colony). When he was eventually asked to become class master (staff representative) for the class, he was sure that the administration had finally, though reluctantly, understood his case.

Discussion

At this point, we take a step back and will aim – in this second part of the article – to consider the question ‘What broader implications can be drawn from Kuchah’s story of practice, specifically for others interested in engaging and developing learner autonomy “in difficult circumstances”?’ First, we consider some implications for conceptualizing work in the field of learner autonomy before moving on to consider broader implications for other teachers of English in difficult circumstances.

A pedagogy for or of autonomy?

We begin by considering the question of whether it is legitimate to consider Kuchah’s innovative approach as a form of autonomy-oriented pedagogy, given that it was not developed explicitly with the ideal of learner autonomy in mind.

At the outset it is worth mentioning that Kuchah’s approach has received circumstantial validation as an ‘autonomy-like’ one, not only from his teachers in the UK (including Richard Smith and Ema Ushioda) but from audience members including Leni Dam and David Little who were present at his talk at the University of Warwick in May 2007 (see footnote 1). The subsequent invitation to Kuchah to retell his story at the 2009 Bergen Nordic Workshop on Autonomous Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom provided further confirmation that autonomy-oriented researchers and practitioners can recognize his practice as being akin to a pedagogy for autonomy. What, though, makes it recognizable as such, and in what ways might it differ?

One approach to answering this question is to highlight ways in which Kuchah’s practice matches or fails to match the criteria for an ‘autonomous classroom’ which are presented by probably the best-known classroom autonomy practitioner, Leni Dam, in a pair of articles

entitled ‘How do we recognize an autonomous classroom?’ (Dam 1994, 2008). To answer her own question in the first (1994) article, Dam combined insights from her classroom experience with perceptions she had gathered from four different groups of in-service teachers attending her courses during 1990–1994. For the second (2008) article, some clarifications and slight modification have been added, but the aspects she highlights remain basically the same.

In concrete terms, Dam (2008) describes the characteristics of what she calls an ‘autonomous classroom’ under two headings: (1) The physical frame or setting (‘What can actually be seen and heard by the teacher, by the learners?’) and (2) Important issues as regards the ongoing activities and processes (‘What is being said and done by the teacher, by the learners?’).

With regard to what can be seen and heard, the following aspects are the same in Dam’s and in Kuchah’s classrooms:

- learners are placed in groups
- there is intensive student activity and engagement
- learners are engaged in many different activities [although in Kuchah’s case it was more usual for there to be ‘several’ rather than ‘many’ different activities going on at the same time]
- the teacher is moving around or sitting down, engaged in discussions with individuals or groups
- examples of student products are posted on the wall

However, Dam (ibid.) emphasizes that various issues relating to activities and underlying processes are more important than what strikes one initially when entering the teaching and learning environment. From this perspective, also, Kuchah’s practice appears broadly consistent with the following characteristics, all listed by Dam in both her 1994 and 2008 articles:

1) The role of teacher and learners:

A changed teacher role, the teacher’s role as a consultant and a partner, taking hold/letting go, shared decision making, more definite awareness about aims, reduced teacher dependence, increased student independence, the knowledge of the learners and the teacher is important and of value, responsibility.

2) Activities in the autonomous classroom

Interested/happy/engaged/satisfied learners, greater linguistic activity, communication, authentic/real dialogue, many varied activities, possible choices, differentiation as opposed to sorting, what you do is meaningful, responsibility, development via dialogue, evaluation, awareness of own resources and the resources of others.

3) The social aspect of learning

Taking care of/ paying attention to, group work, joint responsibility

In all the above respects, then, Kuchah’s practice can be seen as akin to Dam’s. However, there are a few remaining aspects of ‘physical frame or setting’ mentioned by Dam which are present in her but not in Kuchah’s practice:

- logbooks ... can be seen lying open next to the learners

- on the wall, posters display requirements and guidelines
- various materials to be used by the learners can be found on the shelves

And in the following two (related) areas concerned with underlying ‘activities and processes’, Kuchah’s practice also seems to differ from the kind of practice described by Dam:

4) Documentation of processes and products

Posters, learners’ products, a process of development, awareness raising.

5) Materials

Many different materials.

Taking the last aspect first, in Kuchah’s experience there was not the kind of variety of materials and related activities that was found in Dam’s practice, but the students did bring in different kinds of materials, while different groups, to an extent at least, did work on different activities. At least partially, it seems, the difference in this area seems relatable to the overall lack of availability of many materials in the surrounding environment (to be discussed further below).

With regard to (4) above and the related lack of logbooks or posters displaying requirements, this absence of written documentation in Kuchah’s practice is also relatable partly to lack of resources (e.g. poster paper). There were ‘together’ sessions every week when overall arrangements were discussed and renegotiated, but these were not documented in writing. More than this, however, the use of logbooks and posters described by Dam can be seen as an *enhancement* of autonomy-oriented practice which corresponds with an awareness on the part of the teacher that learner autonomy is a capacity to be *developed* and not simply ‘engaged with’. At the time Kuchah was innovating in the way described above he was conscious of *involving* students in decision-making more than before but was not conscious of a need to *develop* their capacity to be involved (i.e. he was not engaged in any form of explicit ‘learner training’ or metacognitive ‘awareness-raising’). This is an area of practice that he has become aware of since becoming familiar with the concept of learner autonomy, and one that he would like to enhance in the future, through evaluation of learning by students which could well involve the use of logbooks or posters but which might – perhaps more appropriately in this context, given resourcing constraints – equally well involve alternative forms of discussion.

It is perhaps significant to note in this context that Dam’s own practice appears to have evolved over time towards an increasing use of both posters and logbooks for reflection on learning, and towards an increasing focus on developing autonomy as an explicit goal (see Dam with Smith 2006, 3–4). In a process similar to Kuchah’s, Dam began with a pragmatic strategy to *involve* her pupils more which she did not conceptualize at the time as a pedagogy for autonomy, and she later developed ways of enhancing *reflection* on practice by both students and the teacher. Similarly, Smith (2003, 136–7, 140–1) has described how in his own experience an initial experiment with student self-direction of classroom activities was enhanced later on by means of an increasing emphasis on student self-evaluation and a more explicit focus on developing learner autonomy. Perhaps this kind of evolution might be a commonly attested one.

Assuming, then, that Kuchah’s practice, as described above, *can* be seen as akin to a pedagogy for autonomy but without the explicit focus on developing learner autonomy as a

goal which characterizes, for example, Dam's retrospective (1994, 2008) descriptions of her practice, we feel it might be useful to use the term 'pedagogy of autonomy' to describe Kuchah's kind of practice. By this we mean a classroom pedagogy which can be seen to *engage with* learners' pre-existing autonomy (see Smith 2003; Holliday 2003; Smith 2008) – but which is not explicitly intended to *develop* learners' autonomy (i.e. their capacity to take charge of their own learning) as a goal. We propose, then, to contrast the term 'pedagogy of autonomy' with the term 'pedagogy for autonomy' which has become increasingly common in the autonomy literature. According to the distinction we are making, 'pedagogy for autonomy' describes approaches to classroom-based learning where the goal of promoting learner autonomy is explicitly in the mind of the teacher, whereas in a pedagogy of autonomy students' existing autonomy is engaged but developing this capacity is not an explicit goal.³

Using the term 'pedagogy of autonomy' in this specialized sense will, we hope, be beneficial. It perhaps enables us to see more clearly that many 'good' teachers in the past have been autonomy practitioners *avant la lettre* (see Smith 2002 for some examples), that what tends to be recognized locally as 'good practice' may contain aspects of pedagogy of autonomy – though not named as such – in many contexts in the world, and that pedagogies of autonomy will continue to manifest themselves even when the current widespread use of the term 'autonomy' subsides from mainstream professional discourse, as it surely will (*ibid.*). This distinction also serves to highlight the fact that there may be two overall defining features of a pedagogy for autonomy, or, put in another way, two overall characteristics of an 'autonomous classroom' (cf. Dam, cited above): (1) *engagement* of students' pre-existing autonomy (present also in a pedagogy of autonomy), and (2) *development* of autonomy as an explicit goal (which is not present in a pedagogy of autonomy as defined above).

The relevance of learner autonomy in an African school setting – and in 'South' settings more generally

The appropriateness of autonomy in Africa

Having argued that Kuchah's practice constituted a pedagogy of though not explicitly *for* autonomy, we turn now to the question of how useful, indeed 'appropriate' learner autonomy might be as a concept in African situations. As Sonaiya (2005, 222) remarks, there have been very few contributions to the literature on learner autonomy from an African perspective, indeed, so far as we are aware, only Sonaiya herself (2002, 2005) has previously written in this area, and she appears sceptical, to say the least, about the relevance of autonomy to African contexts. Thus, the thrust of her 2002 article is that the idea of autonomy, or – more precisely – what she terms the 'autonomous instruction method' is inappropriate in African settings. Writing as a Nigerian academic, her specific objection is that 'A method that seems to undermine the communal aspect of learning might not be effective for Yoruba learners, a people for whom participation in a communal setting is of great value' (p. 113).

However, Sonaiya's critique appears to be focused on a particular, narrow interpretation of what autonomy entails, that is, what she terms 'autonomous instruction', or 'a method of independent learning' (p. 111). Responding to similar 'cultural' objections to the idea of autonomy in Asian contexts in the 1990s, Aoki and Smith (1999) noted that autonomy does not necessarily entail individualism and they reemphasized the point made previously by Little (1991) that autonomy is not a 'method' but, rather, a capacity whose enhancement constitutes a possible educational *goal*. As Benson (2007, 25) points out, then, 'Sonaiya's argument is [...] mainly directed at individualized, technology-based approaches to language

instruction’, and he adds that ‘[Her] critique illustrates how debates on autonomy and culture are often less concerned with appropriateness of the principle that learners should take more control of their learning than they are with the appropriateness of methods of teaching and learning associated with this principle’.

Kuchah’s narrative, by contrast, seems to provide evidence of the appropriateness of a particular form of autonomy-related *practice* in an African school setting, and this serves to counteract the ‘cultural objections’ to autonomy in Africa which are raised by Sonaiya (2002), in much the same way as accounts of practice served to counteract similar objections in relation to East Asian contexts in the mid- to late-1990s (see, for example, Aoki and Smith, 1999; Smith 2001, 2003).

In support of her argument against ‘autonomous instruction’, Sonaiya claims that ‘the Yoruba people of western Nigeria have not attained a stage of “development” where the individual is privileged over the community’ (p.113), and suggests that ‘A method that seems to undermine the communal aspect of learning might not be effective for Yoruba learners’ (ibid.). Kuchah, as we have seen, developed an understanding that his students ‘were individuals with different needs and different expectations, yet they had a strong sense of belonging to the whole group’, and the latter part of this statement, at least, seems to parallel Sonaiya’s emphasis on the ‘communal aspect of learning’. We do not wish to question Sonaiya’s assertions in this area, then, but it appears to us far from the case that the individual is ‘privileged over the community’ in the type of classroom practice engaged in by Kuchah. Rather, discussion in a whole class setting and, subsequently, project-oriented group work could be viewed as forming a supportive structure within which individual autonomy can be engaged and potentially developed. This corresponds with Little’s (1991, 5) argument that ‘our capacity for self-instruction probably develops out of our experience of learning in interaction with others: in order to teach ourselves, we must create an internal substitute for the interaction of home or classroom’. From a Vygotskian perspective, in a classroom context effective teaching/learning begins as an interpersonal activity with the teacher or other expert peers regulating the learner’s learning until it becomes intrapersonal to the point where the learner can ‘take control’ of his own learning. In other words, other-regulation leads to self-regulation, or the capacity for independent problem solving (Wertsch 1985; Cameron 2001). In any context, then, there is a social dimension to learner autonomy (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander and Trebbi 1990; Kohonen 1992; Little 1991), and this relates to the views that the essential condition of social beings is one of interdependence and that autonomy cannot be seen as total detachment (Little 1991).

In a later review, Sonaiya (2005, 220) appears to subscribe to a revised, more ‘sociological’ position, one which recognizes that ‘the role of ethnic culture as a constraint to autonomy might turn out [...] to be less important than that of professional, institutional or organisational culture’. She adds that ‘we might need to start looking elsewhere, very seriously, for alternative explanations to phenomena which we have hitherto accounted for in terms of ethnic or cultural influences’. While it is of relevance, then, that Kuchah’s story offers a counterbalance to Sonaiya’s (2005) ‘cultural’ critique of autonomy in African contexts, there are other issues relating to these contexts which might deserve further exploration, and to which we now turn.

Opening up a South–North axis in discussion of learner autonomy: Experience ‘in difficult circumstances’

Beyond just referring to an African ‘cultural’ context, our presentation of Kuchah’s story here opens up what might be termed a ‘South–North axis’ in the discourse on learner autonomy. This serves to complement the East–West differences/similarities which were a focus of concern in the 1990s (see Smith 2001 for a summary); indeed, as Sonaiya (2005, 222) emphasizes, ‘The literature on the culture/autonomy interface is dominated by studies dealing with Asian learners’. Whereas in the ‘East–West debate’ of the 1990s the point at issue was largely whether autonomy was ‘culturally’ appropriate, the issue we wish to emphasize here concerns, rather, the relative lack of material educational resources which can often obtain in classrooms in ‘developing’ or ‘emerging’ (i.e. what we term here ‘South’) countries.

There may have simply been an assumption in the past that a pedagogy for autonomy is most feasible in small classes with plenty of resources (note that several of the aspects of an ‘autonomous classroom’ which are listed by Dam and referred to above cannot obtain in the context Kuchah taught in, simply due to lack of resources). Given, also, the way autonomy is typically associated with technological innovations or individualized learning, it may have simply been assumed in the past that autonomy has no relevance in relatively under-resourced large classes. Also, as Sonaiya (2005, 222) notes, ‘Resource-poor countries [...] do not have easy access to the global forum; their voices are often not represented’. Whatever the explanation, there has been very little previous reference made to autonomy in ‘South’ contexts (as discussed below, Zakia Sarwar’s work in Pakistan has constituted an exception; see also Fonseca’s (2003) description of autonomy-oriented practice as a ‘rescue solution’ in a rural Sri Lankan setting).

Thus, rather specifically and uniquely (and this is where the interest value of his story for a wide readership may mostly lie, that is, the ‘gap’ in the existing literature that the account can be seen to fill), Kuchah’s experience provides evidence of the appropriateness of engaging with learners’ autonomy in (very) *difficult circumstances*.

The fact that Kuchah was able to engage in this form of practice with a class of over 200 pupils highlights the inadequacies of beliefs within *North* contexts that a pedagogy of autonomy is only possible with small classes of motivated learners. Kuchah’s story provides support, indeed, for the counter-argument that if Kuchah could engage with students’ autonomy in such difficult conditions, other teachers should be able to at least attempt this kind of approach in their own, much more favourable circumstances.

However, the even more powerful paradox that we wish to emphasize here is the following: Whereas some teachers might say the kind of practice advocated by Dam (e.g. 1992) is feasible only in small, well-favoured classrooms of well-motivated learners, Kuchah’s similar practice arose out of the *need* to cope with the difficult circumstances of large class teaching in a resource-poor context, and can be seen as a particularly valid response to such circumstances. We shall explore this point further in the following section.

Pedagogy of autonomy as a particularly valid response to difficult circumstances

In the previous sections, our discussion of Kuchah’s story has been situated firmly within the existing discourse on learner autonomy. However, as we have emphasized, the experience related by Kuchah occurred without reference to conceptions of learner autonomy – that is, in our formulation above, it constituted a pedagogy *of* but not *for* autonomy. Kuchah’s innovative practice developed as a pragmatic response to difficult circumstances, not from European examples or theory, and it therefore deserves to be viewed, finally, on its own

terms, as an appropriate bottom-up initiative – that is, less with reference to the literature on learner autonomy and more *with* reference to the known problems of teaching English in difficult circumstances.

The phrase ‘teaching in difficult circumstances’ has been used in the field of ELT since the early 1960s with a particular resonance which may be worth briefly explaining. It was Michael West who coined the phrase, explaining thus:

By [‘difficult’ or] ‘unfavourable circumstances’ we mean a class consisting of over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches (not sitting at individual or dual desks), accommodated in an unsuitably shaped room, ill-graded [i.e. of mixed ability], with a teacher who perhaps does not speak English very well or very fluently, working in a hot climate (West 1960, 1)

Emphasizing that teaching strategies developed for use in relatively well-resourced situations are not necessarily transferable to difficult circumstances, West’s concern was to offer practical techniques which would make teaching in such circumstances more bearable, and more efficient. As both Maley (2001) and, more recently, Smith (2011) have pointed out, the ‘mainstream literature’ on ELT has since then systematically neglected the realities of such circumstances – even though they have constituted the commonest kind of context for ELT in the world.

Kuchah’s class clearly qualifies for the description ‘difficult circumstances’, and our discussion of his story has highlighted the idea that the kind of pedagogy of autonomy he engaged in might be particularly appropriate in such circumstances. To re-emphasize, this is not just a matter of arguing that a pedagogy of autonomy is *feasible* in a large class, under-resourced situation. Beyond, this, the story serves to show how a pedagogy which engages with learners’ existing autonomy can serve as a *practical solution* to, indeed can arise as a *pragmatic response* to the kind of ‘difficult circumstances’ which are often present in ‘South’ contexts, and which ‘North’ discourse on language teaching has tended to ignore for much of its history.

From this perspective, paradoxically, then, this kind of practice can be framed as a *particularly* valid response to difficult circumstances’ (rather than there being any ‘surprise’ that autonomy can be relevant in such circumstances). Thus, Sonaiya’s (2002) argument that pedagogies engaging with learner autonomy are inappropriate in African contexts is particularly difficult to sustain when we consider that contextual factors, such as large classes, the shortage or complete absence of material resources such as course books and technology plus the multilingual backgrounds of many sub-Saharan classrooms make it difficult for teachers to claim complete responsibility for what learners learn. As an African saying has it, ‘A good father does not give his son meat. Instead, he gives him a bow and arrow, and teaches him to hunt’!

This point of view corresponds well with arguments previously advanced by West (1960) and Sarwar (1991/2001):

[T]he larger the class and the more difficult the circumstances, the more important it is to stress learning as the objective. And the higher the elimination [i.e. drop-out rate], the more necessary it is to do so: if a pupil has learnt how to learn he can go on learning afterwards. (West 1960, 15)

Training learners to monitor their own learning is as important in a large class as in a small one – in fact, more important, because in a small class, work can be supervised by the teacher, but in a large class this is virtually impossible. (Sarwar 1991/2001, 131)

This perspective corresponds also with Fonseca's (2003) argument for engaging with pupils' autonomy as a kind of 'rescue strategy' in resource-poor settings and is consistent with Smith's (2003) claim that a 'strong version' of pedagogy for autonomy (that is, one which engages with students' existing autonomy rather than deferring such engagement) – far from being inappropriately imposed – can be viewed as a kind of bottom-up, (becoming-) appropriate methodology 'par excellence'. Kuchah's story provides a rare insight into the realities of the kind of context where most English teaching goes on in the world; beyond this, it paints an even more valuable (because rarer still) picture of what appropriate innovation might look like in such a context, enabling relevant (autonomy-oriented) principles to be drawn from this practice.

Principles from this practice

Following on from the above, Kuchah's current perception is as follows: 'An African teacher does not need to set out to achieve learner autonomy in his/her classroom; autonomy naturally emerges from the difficulties that present themselves, making it incumbent on the teacher to adjust to the realities of the context. What a teacher needs, therefore, is an awareness of the role of learners in the teaching/learning process and to recognise this role by accepting learners' own rights and responsibilities in the process. The existing literature on learner autonomy can only make sense to an African teacher if it reflects the reality of his or her context and culture, and will not make sense if it merely introduces him or her to a new concept'.

In Kuchah's experience, an introduction to the literature of learner autonomy came long after his teaching began to involve practices relatable to learner autonomy. A new awareness then came to enrich his views on teaching, which were already fundamentally in place.

From Kuchah's account of practice, then, we end by extracting the following principles, which we feel may be useful beyond this context to others teaching in difficult circumstances:

1. Get to know learners as unique individuals (recognize the variety of their talents) / *build rapport*.

This was achieved in Kuchah's practice by means of acrostics and other creative writing activities. Establishing an atmosphere conducive to learning by means of such activities may be of particular importance in a large class context. Thus, the importance of rapport has been stressed also by Sarwar (1991/2001, 129), writing of her own innovative approach to teaching large classes in Pakistan:

It is only through the proper rapport that an atmosphere conducive to learning can be built up. Also, 'humanizing' a large class is perhaps the only way to motivate learning.

2. Negotiate with learners (treat them as partners not adversaries); Define common goals / make a contract.

The questions Kuchah regularly asked his learners were as follows:

- What do we want to achieve?
- How shall we achieve it?
- Where shall we find the resources we need?

3. View learners as resource providers and as resources themselves (Use ‘found texts’ / Engage in creative writing – develop creativity, critical thinking and ‘voice’).

There were numerous activities involving the use of materials brought in by students. This was of particular importance in a context where textbook materials were lacking.

Finally, it will help if previously you:

4. Build rapport with / build up credit with administration and colleagues.

As we have seen, a major potential barrier Kuchah faced was the reaction of his colleagues and of the school principal (administration). As Kuchah explained, however, he had built up considerable credit already, due to his strong commitment to outside class activities.

The above principles lay at the heart of what, if a label is needed, we might term Kuchah’s ‘pedagogy of autonomy for difficult circumstances’.

Conclusion

We have seen that rather than being a case of autonomy theory or principles being translated into practice, Kuchah’s practice made no initial reference to autonomy theory and in fact touches on issues which extend beyond present concerns in this domain. Nevertheless, we have drawn attention to some important implications of his account for work in the learner autonomy field as well as for language education research and practice more broadly.

To start with, consideration of Kuchah’s story has enabled us to draw what we hope is a useful distinction between a pedagogy *of* autonomy, by which we mean a classroom pedagogy which can be seen to *engage with* learners’ pre-existing autonomy but which is not explicitly implemented with the aim of *developing* autonomy (for the latter type of practice we have reserved the term ‘pedagogy *for* autonomy’).

We concluded that the existing literature on learner autonomy can be of value in enhancing the kind of approach engaged in by Kuchah. Indeed, there has already been value (to Kuchah) in theorizing from practice and exploring how it could be enhanced from an autonomy perspective (thus, he now feels it could be important to build in a heightened focus on metacognitive awareness-raising and so transform his pedagogy *of* autonomy into a pedagogy *for* autonomy).

However, we have mainly emphasized the benefit Kuchah’s story brings *to* the field of learner autonomy. Firstly, it seems to provide evidence of the appropriateness of a particular form of autonomy-related practice in an African school setting, thus serving to counteract the

‘cultural’ objections to autonomy in Africa which have previously been raised by Sonaiya (2002). More even than this, Kuchah’s account opens up a ‘South–North axis’ to complement an existing ‘East–West’ dimension in the globalized discussion of learner autonomy, by which we mean it provides evidence of the appropriateness of engaging with learners’ autonomy in the kind of *difficult circumstances* which are often present in developing or emerging country contexts. Indeed, Kuchah’s practice arose *out of* the need to cope with the difficult circumstances of large class teaching in a resource-poor setting, and can be seen as a particularly valid response to such circumstances. Thus, both in relation to and beyond the range of the existing literature on learner autonomy, Kuchah’s story is useful in highlighting the importance of practical principles like the following within approaches to bottom-up innovation in developing country contexts:

- getting to know / building rapport with pupils/students
- negotiating with pupils/students
- viewing pupils/students as resource providers / as resources themselves
- building up credit with the administration and with other teachers

Although we have emphasized in this article the specific challenges of teaching in poorly resourced circumstances, we would like to suggest finally that the principles we have derived from Kuchah’s account of his practice are likely to have relevance also in better-resourced settings – for example, the focus on building rapport with learners which is listed among the principles above may be particularly salient in large classes but is probably relevant also to autonomy-oriented innovations in smaller classes (similarly, the focus on building up credit with the school administration may be more generally relevant, particularly if we take into account Holec’s recent (e.g. 2009, 44) emphasis on the importance of investigating how innovation can be brought about in institutional contexts). We would like to conclude, then, by highlighting the fact that the kind of experience reported by Kuchah is not an ‘exotic’ one, and is not necessarily a unique one. Thus, certain European educators have first come across autonomy as a ‘rescue solution’ (Fonseka 2003) in quite a similar manner to Kuchah – in response to other kinds of difficult circumstance, for example the challenge posed by unmotivated teenagers (see, for example, Dam with Smith 2006; Ribé 2000).

Normally, academic conventions require beginning an article with – and thus privileging – theory which is then related to practice, but we have deliberately reversed this order in the present paper. We have done so partly in order to counteract the normal tendency for constraints to be portrayed as a hindrance to the promotion of a pre-existing ideal of autonomy, viewed as primary. Instead, we have attempted to reflect the way autonomy emerged in Kuchah’s experience, in other words to portray the engagement of learners’ autonomy as a potentially effective means for teachers and learners to *address* perceived constraints, in the (varied) difficult circumstances confronting them. It is our hope that the innovative way in which we have foregrounded one author’s narrative of teaching experience may serve as a possible model for future collaborative reports of bottom-up language teaching inquiry.

Footnotes

¹ While the incidents described took place in 2000-3, it was not until the academic year 2006-7, when Kuchah was at the University of Warwick studying for his MA in ELT (English for Young Learners), that he began to conceive of his previous experiences in terms relating to learner autonomy. This came about through discussions with his teachers at Warwick, including Ema Ushioda as well as Richard Smith. These discussions culminated in an invitation from Richard to Kuchah to step in to fill a vacant slot at a conference on ‘Learner Autonomy in Language Learning: Widening the Circle’ held at Warwick in May 2007. Kuchah’s talk there can be found

online at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/go/circal/12mayevent/harry_kuchah/. Following the conference, and at the suggestion of David Little – one of the main speakers at the event – we collaborated to further theorize Kuchah’s experience from an autonomy perspective, as reflected in this article and as developed at fuller length in an as yet unpublished book-length manuscript (Kuchah and Smith, in process).

² The methodological approach we have adopted is therefore akin to ‘narrative inquiry’ (Clandinin and Connelly 2004) or, rather, a hybrid of narrative inquiry and a modified form of ‘autoethnography’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000). ‘Kuchah’s story’ was written in the first instance by Kuchah himself, originally in the first person, on the basis of our transcribed conversations. Partly for reasons of space, we took an early decision to present a relatively polished, edited account rather than quoting directly from the original recorded conversations. Subsequently, at a relatively late stage, we decided to transpose the narrative to the third person, for the purpose of acknowledging the jointly constructed nature of both halves of the paper. Whereas in many forms of narrative inquiry the issue arises of how best to respect and how to resist over-interpreting the interviewee’s ‘voice’, this is partially resolved in the present paper by the fact that Kuchah – as first author – had both joint control over and joint responsibility for the representation and interpretation of his experience.

³ Flávia Vieira was the first in our field to use the phrase ‘pedagogy for autonomy’ (‘pedagogia para a autonomia’ in the original Portuguese), contrasting this with the term ‘pedagogy of dependence’ – ‘pedagogia da dependência’ – in her 1998 doctoral thesis and subsequent publications). As she has indicated to us in a recent personal communication (9/12/09), she coined the term ‘pedagogy of dependence’ for the following reason: ‘Teachers do not necessarily intend to promote dependence (in fact they often complain about student dependence) but their pedagogy is based on dependence, relies on dependence, depends on student dependence. That’s why I used “of” instead of “for”’. By contrast, ‘with “pedagogy for autonomy” I wanted to stress [...] a purpose. Autonomy as an explicit goal’. We are indebted to Flávia for this information, which has helped us clarify likewise, in our own minds, that some teachers do not necessarily intend to promote autonomy – and may not even have this as an *implicit* goal – but, using her formulation, their pedagogy is ‘based on autonomy, relies on autonomy, depends on autonomy’; thus, for us, such teachers can be seen to be engaged in a pedagogy *of* rather than *for* autonomy.

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