Teacher development, teacher-research, and autonomy

Richard Smith talks with Simla Course

Richard Smith founded the JALT Learner Development SIG in Japan in 1993, was editor of *Independence* **from 2006 to 2008, and since 2008 has been joint convenor of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy. Aside from many authored and co-authored articles on practices and principles of pedagogy for autonomy both with language learners and with teachers-in-training, Richard has co-edited books including** *Learner Autonomy Across Cultures* **(Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and** *Autonomy in Language Learning* **(IATEFL, 2011). His interests include the history of language teaching, teaching in difficult circumstances, and teacher-research. You can find out more about him at his website www.warwick.ac.uk/richardcsmith**

Richard, you recently went to Japan as a guest speaker at JALT Learner Development SIG's 20th anniversary conference. Can you tell us how you felt, as founder of the SIG, and what kind of things you said there?

Yes – I felt very proud to have been involved in the creation of the SIG, and to be invited back. But in my plenary I mainly wanted to focus on the achievements of the SIG *after* I left Japan in 2000 and what I thought had contributed to those achievements. So, I referred to books produced from within the SIG like *Autonomy You Ask!* (Barfield and Nix 2003) and *Realising Autonomy* (Irie and Stewart 2012) and I talked about the way I thought the innovative processes of teacher development within the SIG had led to these books, which are quite unique as collections of teacher-research connected with autonomy. They came out of a very collaborative process which involved sharing and critiquing drafts, critical reader responses, and so on – a process which is quite special and in itself autonomy-related but which needs to be more widely known, I think, so that these practices can become more widespread. Books like these have given voice to a lot of teachers who might not otherwise have shared their work in print. And I think we've seen this in the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG, too, recently, with the book *Stories of Practices* [eds. Barfield and Delgado, 2013]. These publications have all been quite radical, autonomy-related adventures, I think. And, after all, autonomy is for teachers too, not just for our learners.

Why do you call these publications 'radical'? And I'm picking up that you see them as having engaged *teachers'* **autonomy. Can you say a bit more?**

Yes, radical above all in the process kind of sense I've been describing – that they were collaborative rather than just individual products, and that they were empowering – engaging and developing the autonomy of the teachers involved in the process, as far as I can see. And the actual products themselves are quite innovative too, involving a lot of reflective first person writing – this is another aspect of the 'autonomy movement' which deserves highlighting I think – the way it's brought with it some innovative forms of writing and of oral sharing of experience among teachers.

You wrote an article with Andy some time ago [Barfield and Smith 1999] about innovative, less expert-centred forms of conference and workshop design – is this area of innovation something else that's a characteristic for you of what you call the autonomy movement?

I wouldn't say it's been common or characteristic, but, yes, it's something I think we need to think about seriously if we're serious about autonomy – how, as educators, can we set up ways of sharing experience with one another that reflect a bottom-up view of teacher development, rather than reinforcing the same old top-down impositions of opinions *onto* teachers. Getting away from playing 'follow the leader' and listening to gurus and replacing that with more negotiated ways of working which value teachers' own experiences. It's a continual challenge though, since we're working in an industry that's set up in the interests of various kinds of salespeople, and I don't just mean publishers, authors and so on but academics and other language teaching theorists, too. For this industry to operate, teachers need to be positioned to see themselves as consumers

dependent on experts, and the idea of teachers as producers of their own knowledge in their own contexts, together with their students of course, represents a threat to the status quo, to the hegemony of outside experts. But if we're serious about autonomy, then making conferences and workshops more democratic and participant-centred is important, I think, something we need to plan for, just as we plan for student-centred teaching – so, in this sense the issue of how we relate to other teachers in conferences and workshops is a part of autonomy-related practice, part of getting away from old transmission-oriented paradigms and inventing something new, more constructivist.

You mentioned students there, and that's the first time we've seemed to be discussing *learner* autonomy – am I right that since you left Japan you've mainly been focusing on *teacher*s' autonomy?

Well, yes and no. It's quite true that I've mainly been working with teachers – and future teachers – since I left Japan and came to the UK, though I have tried to keep my hand in by teaching languages now and then. But I don't see any fundamental difference between pedagogy for autonomy with language learners and with teachers-as-learners – both involve working with what people bring to the classroom, building on that and developing that, rather than imposing my own pre-set ideas – whether as a language teacher or as a teacher educator. So you could say, I suppose, that I've been interested in teacher autonomy but it's teachers' autonomy *as learners* that I've felt I've been engaging and developing. And, just as with learner autonomy I'm really not interested in teacher autonomy as an abstract concept – more as a way of explaining to myself and others, if they want to listen, what I've been doing in practice.

You've written quite a bit, in fact, about teacher-learner autonomy, in a number of articles which came out of your own action research with your students and colleagues at the University of Warwick. Do you think teacher educators should always engage in action research themselves?

Well, no, just as I don't think *teachers* have to engage in action research unless they want to, even though in my own experience it's been a very empowering means of developing myself as a teacher – the equivalent, really, of language learners taking more charge of and becoming more reflective about their own language learning. It's true that I've promoted action research with my student-teachers and I haven't given them a choice over whether or not to

engage in it – and it's equally true that I've engaged in my own action research in relation to my students' practice, just as I used to do with my English language students in Japan. But when it comes to practising teachers or teacher educators it's not a moral imperative – it's up to them! I do think, though, that teacher educators who promote action research should have at least some experience of doing it themselves – otherwise it can come across as a very top-down kind of thing – academics telling teachers yet again what they 'should' be doing – or as something you need an academic training for which only they can provide – rather than as something which is essentially *by* teachers *for* themselves and their students …

So in the workshops you've been doing recently with teachers in Chile and other places you haven't been promoting learner autonomy but you have been engaging the autonomy of those taking part?

Not explicitly, but in fact yes, absolutely – what I've been doing has been absolutely connected with teachers' autonomy as learners, but in ways which aren't always clear to me till I start to think about it. So I'm glad of this opportunity to stand back a bit from what I've been doing and see *why* I've been doing what I've been doing recently with teachers in Chile, but also in other countries like Cameroon and Nepal. I've been lucky enough to be invited to talk and run workshops at teacher association conferences there – and in the case of Chile it was to launch a British Council project supporting action research by secondary school teachers. I think what's linked these experiences has been the fact that teachers in all these countries face quite difficult circumstances including large classes and lack of physical resources (though no lack of human resources in the form of students and the experiences they bring to the classroom, of course). The challenge – and my great interest these days – has been in seeing whether the notion of teachers taking control of their own learning has any value in such circumstances, in conditions where typical top-down solutions mediated by imported methods, materials and technologies have quite obviously been irrelevant and have failed to take hold.

What kind of things *do* seem to work for these teachers, then?

I'm not claiming I've hit upon any kind of magic solution but one thing I've been very involved in is coordinating a network of teachers and researchers interested in issues of teaching in low-resource classrooms [Ed. note – the TELC network; website address: bit.ly/telcnet-home].

These issues have been almost completely neglected in mainstream thinking and research on ELT. The ideas that have been shared within TELC have tended to be seen as very relevant by teachers in the workshops I've been facilitating, probably *because* they've come from other teachers – not from the top downwards, not from people unfamiliar with their type of context as so often happens. Actually, it's interesting – though not surprising, I suppose, for someone firmly committed to learner autonomy – that many of the teachers' most successful experiences have had a lot to do with engaging students' own autonomy, as the experiences of Harry Kuchah in Cameroon or Zakia Sarwar in Pakistan have shown. It's important to stress again, though, that the successful experiences emerging have come out of teachers' own experiences and contexts, rather than being 'applications' of autonomy theory in any sense.

Why do you think it so important to stress that?
I'm stressing that because – to go back to your last question – what I find works for teachers isn't being told to adopt others' ideas but finding things out for themselves, in much the same way as you might say with reference to language learners "You can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink". They have to *want* to change themselves, and they need to know how to do so. So, offering ideas that come from others in a similar situation is only half the story, though an important one – the other half, and this is where autonomy comes in again, is in finding appropriate ways of supporting teacher development, of building up teachers' willingness and capacity to change. There's a joke about this that I heard recently – "You can take a horse to water… You can't make it drink – but you can make it thirsty"!

Together with two of my former PhD students at Warwick – Mais Ajjan and Harry Kuchah – we've been developing what we call an 'enhancement approach' both to research and to teacher education for teachers in difficult circumstances. This has grown up through our discussions and various training experiences quite organically, and it's Harry who's given the name to our approach. Just as in research we try to base our practice on identifying cases of good practice rather than identifying deficits or gaps in relation to outside, 'ideal' ideas (and there's a lot of that kind of research around – too much in my view), we start with identifying cases of good practice and attempt to build understanding and dissemination on top of those. The best place to start, in my view is with teachers' own experiences of success in their classrooms. Ask

them to recall a recent successful experience. Then follow up with questions about *why* it was successful, and how that success could be generated in different ways in the future. As I said, it turns out that things often do come back to autonomy actually – teachers' most successful experiences are often when they recognize that students are engaged, curious, being creative, and so on – all are linkable to autonomy, though highlighting that isn't my goal.

That's not teacher-research, though…or is it? I'm asking because I know that you're very interested in teacher-research and are placing a strong emphasis on it in IATEFL's Research SIG, which you're coordinating.
That's right. I do value teacher-research – I've seen from my own experience and from that of my student-teachers that engaging in it can be very empowering; it can place a sense of being in control into teachers' hands, which is exactly where it belongs – as opposed to in the hands of the gurus, leaders, academics, publishers, authors, salespeople and so on that I referred to earlier. But it can be very hard for teachers to find the time to do their own research, or to have the confidence, especially when they associate research with academics – with people who are somehow superior in research skills to them.

I think what I've been doing recently has been using some of the experience I've gained over the last decade or more in teacher education at Warwick – experiences I've documented in the pieces you referred to earlier relating to teacher-learner autonomy – but I've been extending that into work with in-service teachers and seeing what is *feasible* for them, particularly bearing in mind the realities of teaching in difficult circumstances. So teacher-research *has* been something I've been attempting to engage teachers in, not just asking them about their recent successes. The project in Chile has just come to an end and it was successful in many ways, not so successful in others, but a great learning experience for the next time we do it. It's very difficult for teachers to find the time to do action research, which is why we set off with the notion of 'exploratory' action research – something I've been very keen to emphasize because I think many action research models seem to start with plunging in with an action without taking time to stand back and see what kind of intervention might be useful – or whether any intervention is actually needed. Dick Allwright's early ideas on exploratory practice were probably quite important in influencing my approach, with his emphasis on the need for research to be built into and not to

interfere with everyday practice, and the focus he places on action for understanding – exploration in other words.

This reminds me of a workshop you gave at an IATEFL conference a year or two ago – with Ema Ushioda and Sarah Mercer – where you were placing value on the process of research being useful for learners, for the development and engagement of their autonomy in fact.

Yes, I've been calling that 'autonomy-oriented teacher-research' recently – autonomy-oriented in the sense of teacher-research that engages and develops learners' autonomy, but teachers' autonomy, too. There are other facets of that that I've become interested in – there's teachers researching with children, for example. At Warwick we've got a project going with Professor Rama Mathew at Delhi University, and with my colleague Annamaria Pinter. I'm also starting to experiment with new ways of teachers *presenting* on and publishing their research – ways which aren't necessarily academic but which engage teachers' creativity and existing presentation skills.

You seem to have been involved with SIGs throughout your academic career – why have you continued to put so much of your energy into teacher associations?

I guess I've learned a lot from associations myself and want to put something back! You're right – it's time-consuming. You gain as much as you put in, though. I'm even writing a history of IATEFL now, commissioned for the 2016 conference, which will be IATEFL's 50th. I think of it as a kind of subaltern history – I mean, history 'from below' – because, though teacher associations have been important to me – first, JALT and now IATEFL – they're not yet taken seriously as a subject of academic study.

So how does your interest in history relate to what we've been talking about? Why is a sense of history important, do you think? And do teacher associations really merit histories?

It goes back to teacher autonomy again, for me, in the sense of teachers being autonomous as learners of teaching, not beholden to ideas just because they're the latest fashion. And that applies in a paradoxical way to autonomy. As it's become a mainstream concept there are dangers of pursuing it just because it's a buzz-word. What's important is not the word or the theory but the reality of power relations between people, and of a particular view of the relationship between practice and theory. If you read what I've written I think I'm quite consistent on this point, of deriving theory from

practice, and resisting top-down theorizing. So history shows that trends come and go, that top-down reform efforts tend to fail, that primary and secondary teaching have been vastly, indeed, I'd say *dysfunctionally* neglected, compared with university and language school teaching, but also that theory has derived from practice and practitioners as much as if not more than from applied linguists and theorists – in other words history can open up a space for appropriate methodology, which can itself only be based on teachers taking control of their own learning and finding value in their own experience, and that's where we come again to teacher-research and teacher-learner autonomy.

Richard, with the last issue we celebrated the 60th issue of *Independence*. As a former editor, do you have anything to say about that?

It's a big job, and – unfortunately – a generally thankless task, to edit a newsletter. When I took over there hadn't been one for some time, in fact there'd been a number of hiatuses in the SIG's history, as I wrote in my history of the SIG (back in *Independence* 40, I think). Before leaving the LA SIG committee, one of the things I helped to achieve, I think, was ensuring there was planning for a succession – both for the newsletter and for the coordinator role in the SIG – and that's something I learned about from my previous mistakes, not having done that well enough when I left the Learner Development SIG in Japan. Letting go is as hard to do for a successful newsletter editor or coordinator as it is for a teacher but it's necessary for sustainability! One thing – we kept the name *Independence* when we changed the name of the SIG to 'Learner Autonomy'. I think that was a very good decision – it's a fine name and a great newsletter!

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