Pedagogy for autonomy in modern languages education

Theory, practice and teacher education

Edited by
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Authentik books for language teachers

Section III

Teacher education for teacher and learner autonomy

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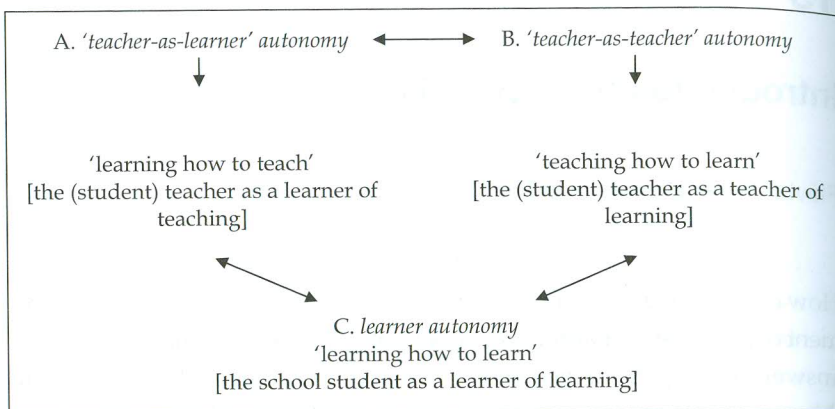# Introduction to Section III

Flávia Vieira, University of Minho, Portugal

How can language teacher education programmes promote the development of pedagogy for autonomy in schools? The fact that there is no single answer to this question becomes clear as we read the first five chapters in this section, where eight teacher educators from four different countries (Spain, Norway, Sweden and Portugal) report on their experience in pre-service teacher education in two contexts: language teaching methodology courses (Javier Suso López, Turid Trebbi, June Miliander, and Isabel Barbosa et al.) and supervised *practicum* (Flávia Vieira & Maria Alfredo Moreira). If pedagogy for autonomy in schools is context-sensitive and flexible, the same seems to be true for the pedagogy of teacher education aimed at encouraging it. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the last chapter in the section (Manuel Jiménez Raya & Flávia Vieira), where a review of five teacher development projects (four in-service and one pre-service) is undertaken with the aim of uncovering images and issues of research into teacher development towards learner autonomy.

To a large extent, the variety of discourses and practices within the field result from the ways teacher educators understand and explore possible relations between three interrelated corners of what we might call the 'autonomy triangle' – 'teacher-as-learner autonomy', 'teacher-as-teacher autonomy', and 'learner autonomy' (see Figure 1).[1] Differentiated foci in teacher education programmes seem to result primarily from the role played by teaching practice within those programmes. Pre-service methodology courses that do not integrate teaching practice at school, as

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[1] In the figure, the terms 'teaching' and 'learning' are broad in scope, which means that the expression 'learning how to learn' under 'learner autonomy' is meant to include all that students as 'learners of learning' might learn so as to develop their autonomy (and not only learning strategies).

A. *'teacher-as-learner' autonomy* ⟷ B. *'teacher-as-teacher' autonomy*

'learning how to teach'
[the (student) teacher as a learner of
teaching]

'teaching how to learn'
[the (student) teacher as a teacher of
learning]

C. *learner autonomy*
'learning how to learn'
[the school student as a learner of learning]

Figure 1
The autonomy triangle

in the experiences described by Javier Suso Goméz and Isabel Barbosa et al., tend to focus directly on A as a parallel process to C, thereby expecting to sensitize student teachers to pedagogy for autonomy by creating opportunities for them to experience autonomy as learners of teaching; the same happens in methodology courses that run parallel to or in alternation with short periods of teaching practice, as in the cases of Turid Trebbi and June Miliander, although here it is already possible to start exploring A(-B-C) connections as student teachers interact with school learners; in *practicum* situations where student teachers are placed in schools for longer periods of time, A-B-C links can be more fully explored, as in Flávia Vieira and Maria Alfredo Moreira's experience, since student teachers have the opportunity to develop their autonomy as learners of teaching as they become teachers of learning with a focus on learner autonomy. In-service teacher development programmes like those reviewed by Manuel Jiménez Raya and Flávia Vieira also tend to focus on A-B-C relationships, aiming to enhance the professional expertise of experienced teachers through school-based inquiry, with external support from academic teacher educators/researchers. A common feature of practice-based approaches is that the complexities and constraints inherent in pedagogy for autonomy in schools become more evident, and tensions often arise between tradition and innovation.

Different circumstances thus offer different possibilities as regards teacher education for teacher and learner autonomy. Other variables also seem to play a determining role, like the teacher educators' personal theories, values, background experience and perceptions of context, including their views of teacher education, school cultures and educational policies, all of which appear to influence their practice.

The fact that no grand narrative of teacher education for teacher and learner autonomy can be extracted from local examples is no surprise. However, some consensus seems to exist regarding the value of personal theory building, critical reflection, inquiry, self-regulation, dialogue, negotiation, co-operation, choice and self-direction as conditions for teacher development. Those conditions seem to be facilitated by a variety of teacher development strategies like interaction with experts, counselling, guided learning, self- and peer-assessment, co-operative learning, project work, portfolios, logs and journals, and action research, all of which are documented in the chapters in this section.

Since pedagogy for autonomy entails a democratic view of education, we should ask whether teacher education programmes empower (student) teachers to become agents of personal and social transformation. At the same time though, we must uncover the historical and structural forces that affect the scope and impact of teacher educators' choices. We need to understand how and why practices fall short of ideals, but we also need to reshape those same practices and ideals as we develop an experience-based scholarship of teacher education. The chapters that follow are examples of what that scholarship may look like, and we hope they will inspire others to find ways to explore the 'autonomy triangle' in teacher education settings.

Acknowledgement

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Commentary on Section III

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In a climate of apparently ever-increasing *desire* for the promotion of language learner autonomy – at least as expressed within professional discourse – it is indeed remarkable, as Jiménez Raya and Vieira point out, that there have previously been so few accounts of practice and research in the area of pre-service or in-service teacher education for learner autonomy (TELA). The reports presented in this book therefore constitute a timely and valuable contribution to the development of a knowledge base for TELA, offering a variety of responses to Vieira's question in the Introduction: "How can language teacher education programmes promote the development of pedagogy for autonomy in schools?"

Whereas Vieira and Jiménez Raya and Vieira highlight the necessary local diversity of relevant practices and resist constructing a 'grand narrative', here I shall go against this grain and attempt a unifying commentary, offering some reflections on what can now be said *in general* about a possible knowledge base for TELA (see also Smith and Erdoğan, 2007). In making this attempt I concur with Little (2007: 15), who suggests that "a theory of language learner autonomy should tell us what it is necessary to do in order to develop autonomous language learners and users and at the same time provide us with criteria by which to evaluate our efforts".

Firstly, the authors of these reports, it is quite clear, are united in common *opposition* to forms of education as transmission/reproduction which still tend to be promoted if not in teacher education programmes themselves then via the *practicum* or other school socialization processes in their respective contexts. From a relatively constructivist perspective, they are all likely to agree with Miliander's sentiment: "I cannot see how

the student teachers might develop insights into autonomy or any sort of teaching by only being told about it and reading about it".

Instead, in their various searches for appropriate approaches to TELA, contributors tend to emphasize a need for parallelism between the process of educating student-teachers and that of teaching (pupils) to learn, for example using personal notebooks (Suso and Fernández), portfolios (Miliander) and self-assessment procedures (Barbosa, Fernandes and Paiva) to enable trainees to reflect on and assume control of their own learning of teaching. As Suso and Fernández assert, "We think that this approach towards working (involving the student in reflecting on how to learn and how to teach) is valid and useful [...], among other reasons because we think that this is the kind of practice that they will need to develop in order to promote the autonomy of their own students in their future placements". This kind of 'parallel approach' is justifiable according to the notion – argued for by Little (1995) – that (student) teachers need to experience learner autonomy for themselves if they are to promote it. Presumably, too, the adherence to a 'parallel approach' reflects a common desire for moral consistency, in other words an imperative to 'practise what we preach' as teacher educators.

Doubtless, this kind of 'pedagogy for teacher-(as)-learner autonomy' is of value in its own right (to the extent that it helps *teachers*, or prospective teachers, to engage in reflective, self-directed development), but can it be assumed necessarily to lead to their promoting a pedagogy for language learner autonomy with pupils? As Trebbi points out, on the basis of twenty years' experience of TELA, "the enhancement of [teacher] reflection, independence and self-confidence does not necessarily entail learner autonomy as the ultimate approach". Having experience(s) of learner autonomy in relation to their own life and education may or may not be a *necessary* condition for teachers to engage in pedagogy for autonomy with pupils, but it seems very unlikely to be a *sufficient* condition.

This is one area in which – as Trebbi suggests – the field's general attraction to the appealing but elusive notion of 'teacher autonomy' may have tended to distract attention away from needs to identify a comprehensive enough, generalizable knowledge base for TELA.

What else, then, might be necessary as a basis for TELA whose pri-

mary aim is the promotion of pedagogy for autonomy in schools? Firstly, let us consider Trebbi's own suggestion: "It is not teacher autonomy as such that can support the development of learner autonomy but rather the teacher's insight into what learner autonomy is and how it can develop." What is at stake here is not (only?) teachers having experienced learner autonomy but having conscious insights into its operation. Ultimately, Trebbi emphasizes, a metacognitive awareness-raising approach (or "observation of one's own thinking processes") may be methodologically just as important within TELA as offering 'parallel' experiences of autonomy.

However, even such awareness-raising combined with positive personal experience of self-directed learning may not be sufficient to show (prospective) teachers *why* and *how* they themselves should and can develop their own pupils' autonomy. Two additional components of TELA that might be seen as important here are explicit, persuasive argumentation in favour of the promotion of learner autonomy combined with exposure to and reflection on appropriate examples of practice. Barbosa, Fernandes and Paiva show how positive reasons and models can be provided via near-peer role modelling (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003); other ways might be via classroom video (e.g. Dam and Lentz 1998), the use of case studies from the literature (e.g. Dam 1995), or workshops facilitated by teachers experienced in pedagogy for autonomy.

Potentially much more powerful as an induced learning experience within TELA is actual engagement of (student) teachers in the promotion of autonomy with pupils (a 'practice-based approach', as Vieira terms it in the Introduction). At the same time, this is a relatively high-risk strategy, since there are many constraints which can discourage (student) teachers at the outset. Assuming in-service and pre-service teachers have been prepared by all or some of the means mentioned above to 'give pedagogy for autonomy a go', what can help them, then, to overcome the impediments they might face at the beginning – impediments which can, as noted by Jiménez Raya and Vieira, range from pupils' ingrained beliefs and learning habits to resistance from colleagues (or supervisors, in the case of student teachers), from class size to traditional testing systems, from workload to feelings of uncertainty and insufficiency, and so

on? An important insight into this problem is contained in the following assessment by the same authors: "There seems to be agreement [across a number of studies] that engagement in pedagogy for autonomy requires a never-ending commitment to the planning, monitoring and evaluation of practice, that is, the successful implementation of pedagogical principles over time depends on constant questioning and experimentation". Preparation for reflective inquiry/teacher research as a means for addressing problems when they arise can be argued, then, to be an important additional component of TELA.

By engaging student teachers in action research projects specifically connected with the implementation of pedagogy for autonomy in the *practicum*, Vieira, Moreira and their colleagues at the University of Minho in Portugal appear to have developed a particularly robust approach to meeting this last-mentioned TELA requirement (see Vieira and Moreira). Theirs is a scheme which, appropriately enough, is itself continually being updated through teacher educator inquiry, most recently to prepare student-teachers earlier on for the demands of action research linked to teaching practice (Barbosa, Fernandes and Paiva).

Apart from the fact that a *team* of university-based teacher educators is dedicated to this particular programme, the fact that school-based mentors have themselves been persuaded to commit themselves to the scheme (rather than, as can often be the case, opposing innovation) may also have been crucial in getting student teachers to feel *encouraged towards* and *supported in* pedagogical experimentation (the importance of the school-based mentor's role is particularly emphasized by Vieira and Moreira). Here, it is clear, we begin to move beyond the area of components and methodology of TELA *per se* and into that of institutional and cultural adjustments which may need to be made in its support. The kind of non-hierarchical, collaborative ethos which has been struggled for and so carefully cultivated in the University of Minho–local school context runs counter, it must be recognized, to the top-down arrangements which more frequently characterize teacher education throughout the world. However, if TELA is to contribute to sustainable change more widely, there may need to be far more of the kind of cultural and institutional adjustment, involving a 'levelling out' and tightening of relations between

university faculty, school-based mentors, student teachers and school pupils, which the University of Minho experience exemplifies. The discussion here has moved beyond only TELA *per se*, but this has seemed necessary, given the acknowledged difficulties and the rareness of pedagogy for autonomy being implemented in a sustained manner with pupils in schools, even when the proposed contents and methodologies of TELA summarized provisionally in this commentary have been implemented. *Concerted* rather than piecemeal attempts seem to be needed, then, to associate teacher education more strongly with school-based supervision, existing teaching and learning, research by teachers and, where necessary, curricular or institutional reform if there is to be a profound enhancement of pedagogy for autonomy in schools.

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