The Connection Between Autonomy and Communicative Teaching

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of autonomy in communicative language learning. However, before I do that, let me begin with a little quiz. What do Walt Disney, Frank Lloyd Wright, Pablo Picasso, and Harry Houdini have in common? They all rose to the top of their respective fields—as a cartoonist, an architect, a painter, and an escapologist—without any formal training.

Gibbons et al. (1980) studied the lives of 20 celebrated public figures that rose to the top of their fields without formal training and identified five common characteristics of these people:

1. they possessed a much greater diversity of skills than are generally found in formal schooling;
2. their expertise grew out of extra-curricular activities and school played a minimal or negative role;
3. they focused on their area of expertise rather than developing less in-depth knowledge in a range of areas;
4. they embraced an active, experiential approach to learning;
5. they pursued their learning in spite of great odds, failure and public disapproval.

What is autonomy?

In its general application, autonomy implies a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning. Principally, autonomous learners are able to,

- self-determine the overall direction of their learning,
- become actively involved in the management of the learning process,
- exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities.

Research on autonomy in language learning draws on two major sources. On the one hand, researchers within the sociology and psychology of education have argued

persuasively that autonomy is beneficial to learning, irrespective of the subject matter to be learned (Candy, Brockett & Hiemstra, Boud). On the other, there is now a considerable body of research within the field of language education itself, which supports the contention that autonomy and self-direction are beneficial to second language acquisition in particular. Although the importance of autonomy to effective second language acquisition is often argued on the basis of general learning theory alone, research in the field of second language acquisition is of particular interest because it offers the possibility of grounding the theory of autonomy in *language learning* on evidence that is particular to the processes of learning a second or foreign language.

Why autonomy matters in language learning

The concept of autonomy in language learning is linked to the communicative approach both historically and theoretically. In an important account of the history of autonomy in language learning, Gremmo & Riley (1995: pp. 152-3) argued that the rise of autonomy in language learning in the 1970s and 1980s was connected to a broad rejection of behaviourist assumptions about the nature of second language acquisition. This rejection was apparent in a number of fields (they mention speech act theory, discourse analysis, the ethnography of communication, language in education and the sociology of language). Although the theory of autonomy in language learning, as it developed for example in the work of Holec (1981, 1988) and Little (1991), was influenced by research from beyond the field of language education, it also drew on communicative language learning theory. And in the 1990s, several researchers associated with the development of the communicative approach explored the relationship of autonomy to their work e.g. Breen and Mann, 1997; Littlewood, 1997, 1999; Nunan, 1996, 1997).

Although many definitions of autonomy in language learning make little or no reference to the specifics of second language acquisition (see, for example, Holec, 1981), some researchers have attempted to incorporate communicative assumptions within their descriptions of autonomy. Little (1991: 4), for example, argues that the capacity for autonomy presupposes that "the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning" and, in a later discussion of second language learning as a 'special case' for autonomy, he argues that:

> [I]n order to achieve communicative proficiency learners in formal contexts must be required not simply to practise prefabricated dialogues and role plays, but to use the target language to articulate their own meanings in the fulfilment of communicative purposes that arise naturally in the course of the learning dialogue. The foreign language must be the medium as well as the content of learning. (Little, 1994: p.438)

The connection between autonomy in language learning and the communicative approach is, therefore, relatively well developed at a theoretical level. To date, however, we appear to lack strong empirical evidence that autonomy and a communicative orientation to language learning necessarily go hand in hand. Is it the case, for example, that learners who develop such an orientation are better able to develop the skills associated with autonomy? Could it even be the case that a communicative orientation is a pre-condition for the development of autonomy? In the remainder of this paper, we will discuss these questions on the basis of data provided by learners themselves.

The University of Hong Kong autonomy research project

In this section, I will review some ongoing work being carried out at the University of Hong Kong by Phil Benson and me. We are tracking a group of 60 undergraduates over a period of three years. What we are interested in is the notion of a 'learning career'. The concept of a 'career' is a familiar one, although it is generally associated with a profession rather than learning. Numerous studies have been conducted into the different stages that someone goes through as they progress from an apprentice through to a competent and finally master practitioner.

Phil Benson and I believe that there is potential in looking at our learners' growth and development in the same way, and we have spent the last several years, collecting narrative accounts of the learning experiences of our students, which we are using as a database for developing this notion. As part of the process, we got our learners to tell us about their careers as language learners—when they first encountered English, what the concepts 'language' and 'language learning' mean to them, how these concepts changed over time, what prompted the change, etc. In other words, what we are interested in is how learners themselves conceptualize, or make sense of, language and the language learning process.

Some learner stories

Josephine

Josephine is one of my students at the University of Hong Kong who is taking part in a longitudinal study into the ways in which learners conceptualize and transform their understanding of language and language learning. Josephine was a special student —in contrast with most of our students, she loved English despite many years of traditional, instruction in high school. The samples of language I collected from her over the first semester showed her making dramatic progress, and I was interested in finding out how she did it. One day, we both happened to be crossing the campus at the same time, and the following conversation ensued:

"Hi Josephine – how are things?"

"Fine."

"I wanted to have a chat with you about your English."

"Uh-huh".

"It's coming along fantastically well, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"You must be very pleased with yourself."

"I am."

"Yes, I must be doing something right." I said, in a rather self-congratulatory way.

At this point she stopped, half turned and looked at me quizzically. "Oh, it isn't you, " she said.

"It isn't?"

"No, I don't think so. – I think it's my Canadian roommate."

We laughed at this, and then talked about what it meant. She said that she realized about half way through high school that what she got in school was not enough to turn her into the kind of language user that she wanted to be. In order to develop high-level language skills, she said, she had to do a lot more than memorize grammar rules and lists of vocabulary. And

it was not enough to take part in interactive activities in the classroom, although these certainly helped. In addition she needed to use her English for real communication outside the classroom.

Sandy

My next learner is Sandy. Sandy was a smart, first-year student. When asked to spell out the actual strategies used by her high school teacher, she said:

I learn English in school by, just by doing some exercises on the class or homework. And when we prepare for the exam, we just do all the past paper and that's all, no special learning.… We have different approach if we have different teachers, some teacher will take primary (elementary) school approach. She will let you read a text and then tell you to underline some difficult words and then you have to jot them in a book and we did not like this way because we are not babies, for some teachers they will just give you …we have a textbook and then she will tell us to do the exercise inside that.

I asked:

Do you like that way?

And Sandy replied:

"No" – She laughs – because we don't know what we are doing. In fact, I'm in, I was in the same school as Trudy (another of our informants) and all more less the same. Drills everyday, no fun at all.

At this point, Trudy, who had been listening in said:

"No fun at all, yes. Yeah, I am at the same school as Sandy. Even in English lesson, we don't speak English."

Encouraging learner autonomy

In terms of content, the first step along the path towards autonomy is to make the learners aware of the goals and content of the curriculum, learning program or pedagogical materials. The second step is to involve learners in selecting goals and content from a range of alternatives on offer. Further along the autonomy continuum, learners would be involved in modifying and adapting goals and content. The next step would see learners creating their own goals and content. The final level is one where learners are functioning as fully autonomous learners, transcending the classroom and linking content to the world beyond the classroom.

These different levels are summarized in the table below. Practical illustrations of how these would function in practice can be found in Nunan (1995).

Level	Learner action	Content	Process
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred styles/ strategies
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer	Learners make choices among a range of options
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program	Learners modify and adapt tasks
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives	Learners create their own learning tasks
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond the classroom	Learners become teachers and researchers

In this final part, I show ways in which you can begin to sensitize learners to the learning process, and thereby begin to encourage a greater degree of autonomy.

Integrating language content and the learning process

The idea here is that, in addition to teaching language, we should also begin the process of sensitizing learners to the learning process. There are many ways in which this can be done. In my own teaching and materials development work, I do it through learner strategy training, e.g. making goals explicit, focusing on learning processes, opportunities for reflection, self-assessment, the explicit presentation of strategies, giving learners choices, and providing opportunities for individualization.

Making goals explicit to learners has a number of important pedagogical advantages. In the first place, it helps to focus the attention of the learner on the tasks to come. This enhances

motivation. Research shows that a program in which goals are made explicit leads to higher student performance than programs in which goals are implicit. As Green and Oxford (1995) point out, "goal setting can have exceptional importance in stimulating L2 learning motivation, and it is therefore shocking that so little time and energy are spent in the L2 classroom on goal setting."

Reflection and self-assessment involves thinking about how well you did on a learning task. Reflection can be aided by questionnaires and checklists, or by getting learners to complete review tasks requiring use of language that has recently been learned. Having learners evaluate their learning not only develops their self-critical faculties, but also serves to remind them of the goals of the instructional process. It also prompts learners to begin making links between their communicative goals, and the grammatical and structural means of achieving those goals.

A 'reflective' lesson

From time to time, I devote an entire lesson to tasks that encourage a reflective focus on learning strategies and processes. The following lesson is one that I typically use with a new class of students.

1. Students are told that the content and procedures in the class will be partly derived from their own views on what they like to learn and how they like to learn. They are asked to indicate their attitude be circling a number on the survey according to the following key:

1. I don't like this at all

2. I don't like this very much

3. This is OK

4. I quite like this

5. I like this very much

I. Topics
In my English class, I would like to study topics …

1. about my feelings, attitudes, beliefs etc. 1 2 3 4 5

2. from my academic subjects: psychology, literature etc. 1 2 3 4 5

3. from popular culture: music, films etc. 1 2 3 4 5

4. about current affairs and issues 1 2 3 4 5

5. that are controversial e.g. underage drinking 1 2 3 4 5

II. Methods
In my English class, I would like to learn by …

6. small group discussions and problem-solving 1 2 3 4 5

7. formal language study e.g. studying from a textbook 1 2 3 4 5

8. listening to the teacher 1 2 3 4 5

9. watching videos 1 2 3 4 5

10. doing individual work 1 2 3 4 5

III Language areas
This year, I most want to improve my …

11. listening 1 2 3 4 5

12. speaking 1 2 3 4 5

13. reading 1 2 3 4 5

14. writing 1 2 3 4 5

15. grammar 1 2 3 4 5

16. pronunciation 1 2 3 4 5

IV Out of class

Out of class, I like to …

17. practice in the independent learning center 1 2 3 4 5

18. have conversations with native speakers of English 1 2 3 4 5

19. practice English with my friends 1 2 3 4 5

20. collect samples of English that I find
interesting / puzzling 1 2 3 4 5

21. watch TV / read newspapers in English 1 2 3 4 5

V Improvement

I like to find out how much my English is improving by …

22. having the teacher assess my written work 1 2 3 4 5

23. having the teacher correct my mistakes in class 1 2 3 4 5

24. checking my own progress / correcting
my own mistakes 1 2 3 4 5

25. being corrected by my fellow students 1 2 3 4 5

26. seeing if I can use the language in real-life situations 1 2 3 4 5

2. Students are then asked to get into five groups. The questionnaire responses are cut up into the five sections, each group is given a section and they have to analyze and summarize the data.

3. Groups come up with an interpretation of the data, answering the question: Why do you think the class as a whole has responded as they have to this section of the questionnaire?

4. Students then prepare a report to the class as a whole based on the data that they have collected and analyzed.

Learner diaries

A learner diary is a reflective, first-hand account by a learner of his or her language learning experiences, and his or her reflections on and reactions to the process. I find it useful to use a guided reflective process in which students complete a series of prompts such as the following.

This week I studied	……………………………..
This week I learned	……………………………..
This week I used my English in these places	……………………………..
This week I spoke English with these people	……………………………..
This week I made these mistakes	……………………………..
My difficulties are	……………………………..
I would like to know	……………………………..
I would like help with	……………………………..
My learning and practicing plans for next week are	……………………………..

At the end of each week, students complete this reflection sheet and submit it to me as an email attachment. I comment on it and return it to them. Over the course of a semester, I have noticed the following changes in my learners:

• They gradually shift from a linguistic focus to a more 'communicative' and applied focus.

- They tend to adopt a more 'process-oriented' rather than 'product-oriented' approach to language learning.
- They begin to take greater control of their own learning processes with more emphasis on the process rather than merely the content of learning.
- They begin to see the value of the English course for their regular subjects and start to grasp opportunities to use their English outside of class.

In addition to facilitating the growth of learners' capacity for autonomy and independence, diaries can be very illuminating for both teacher and student.

Conclusion

Sixteen years ago, I wrote a book called *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. In that book, I highlighted the complexity of the relationship between planning, teaching and learning.

> In the past, particularly with the dominance of Tyler's (1949) 'rational curriculum model', it was assumed that there was a simple equation between planning intention, teaching reality, and learning outcome. Such an assumption greatly oversimplifies and distorts what really happens in the teaching-learning process, and leads to unrealistic expectations. It also engenders a sense of frustration and failure in teaching when what is planned is not always translated into learning outcomes. While it is desirable to attempt to bring planned objectives and learning outcomes into alignment, a mismatch between intention and reality should not necessarily be attributed to shortcomings on the part of the teacher. (Nunan 1988: 179)

In this paper, I have built a case for developing autonomy in our learners by connecting it with communicative teaching. I began the paper by defining autonomy and relating it to other concepts. I then moved on to look at some of the practicalities of fostering the growth of autonomy. Next, I sketched out for you some ongoing research that holds out great promise in terms of establishing a relationship between autonomy and communicative language teaching. Finally, I provided a couple of lesson plans intended to help integrate language content and the learning process.

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