Teacher Narratives on "Teaching" About Autonomy

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教員ナラティブ：オートノミーを「教える」

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Abstract : This paper examines the narratives of four university teachers involved in 'teaching' about autonomy through a three-year undergraduate 'Tutoring' course designed to scaffold learners toward self-direction in setting and achieving language-learning goals. These classes are meant for learners to gain the tools necessary to increase autonomy, and for the teachers to promote and support it accordingly. The discussion will center on two narrative threads : balancing the process of discovery towards the best fit for teachers engaged in autonomous learning approaches, with the increased understanding of the best fit for learners at each stage of their studies and lives. While the threads seem to indicate a positive relationship between teachers and learners when there is a good match between the teacher's approach and the learners' comfort zones, the teachers' capacity for change and adjustment should not be discounted.

Key Words : Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, classes on autonomous learning

要旨：本稿は，学部で3年間「英語チュータリングⅠ～Ⅵ」の授業を通して自律性を「教える」ことに関わった4人の教員の，ナラティブの構造を分析したものである。これらの授業は，学習者の自律性を高めるために必要なツールを得ることを目指し，各学習者の英語学習目標とその達成までの方向性の設定を教員が促し，サポートするものである。本稿の議論の中心は次の二つのナラティブ構造である。本稿では主に，1）自律的な学習のアプローチに関わる教員の適合性を発見するプロセスと，2）学習や生活における各段階での学習者の適合性への理解度とのバランスについて論じる。教員のアプローチと学習者の快適ゾーンが適合すれば，両者間の良好な関係が見られるが，教員が必要に応じて修正・調整できる柔軟性を持っておくことも軽視されてはならないと考えられる。

キーワード：学習者自律，教員自律，オートノミー学習

As teachers we often talk about how our learners can become independent, take charge of their learning and come to an understanding that in order to be better language learners they must find the ways that work best for them given some guidance and informed choices. This is all well and good but how do the teachers who 'teach' about autonomy in a classroom setting approach this task? In this paper, I explore some of these approaches through examining their perspectives in the form of narratives based on 'Tutoring' classes focused on developing autonomy. The narratives are matched with the lives of the university students at particular points during their studies. Is there a good fit or match between the teachers approach to teaching about autonomy and the learners' stages in their lives? I examine some of the challenges faced by the teachers in this process and for the learners as they progress through the three years of the course.

Teacher Approaches to Autonomy in the Classroom

The Tutoring classes are a classroom-based approach to the development of learner autonomy and were developed out of the need for more self-directed, customized language learning and determined to be a necessary component within the curriculum. While the integration of the development of learner autonomy as a goal within programs is not new (Sinclair, 2000), Little (1991) emphasized that learner autonomy should be seen as a capacity (for taking control of learning) that can be developed and deployed in a number of ways and situations, including in the classroom. The rise to prominence of learner autonomy as a goal in classroom settings, then, has led to the need for an enhanced awareness both of the importance of the teacher in structuring or scaffolding reflective learning, and of the complex, shifting interrelationship between teacher and learner roles in a 'pedagogy for autonomy'. That is, if students are to learn to 'take control', the teacher may need to learn to 'let go', even as she provides scaffolding and structure (cf. Page, 1992；Voller, 1997), and on the other hand, if students are not ready to 'take control' then the teacher may need to provide more guidance than they might be comfortable administering. The awareness and timing of these processes might reflect on the success or failure of classroom-based approaches.

In addition, fundamental to the development of learner autonomy are the beliefs about teaching and learning held by both teachers and learners. Benson (2008) explored the ways in which the idea of autonomy may appear differently when viewed from a teacher's perspective and then from a learner's perspective. This basic difference may impact the ways in which they make sense of the notion of autonomy. He states that, ". . . from the teachers' perspective, autonomy tends to imply the learner taking control of arrangements whose underlying legitimacy is unquestioned" (p.15). And continues, "From the learners' perspective autonomy is primarily concerned with learning, in a much broader sense, in its relationship to their lives beyond the classroom" (p.15). In which case, how might a teacher approach the teaching of autonomy in an institutional or classroom setting? Benson implored for the need to reconnect learner autonomy to autonomy in life, rather than to specific autonomous behaviors that the teacher may hope for.

LaGanza (2008) also explored the role of the teacher in the development of learner autonomy by analyzing teacher-learner relationships in the classroom. Here the focus is on the dynamic nature of the relationship that offers scope to both teachers and learners to influence the way in which learning happens (or fails to happen). LaGanza concludes that learner autonomy can only develop in an atmosphere in which both teachers and learners are sensitive to the mutual influences at play. That is, learner autonomy must be considered within the context of what aspect of the learners' lives they allow their teachers to view.

In this paper, the dichotomy between the teachers' need to be in control of the classroom and the learners need to take control of their learning is contrasted with the teachers' willingness to 'let go' and learners need to 'hold on' viewed through the teacher narratives and the particular points in the lives of the university students.

Research Setting and Participants

Context

The Tutoring course is a required component in this particular undergraduate English program. A core cohort of 20-25 learners completes the six semester-long modules in three years. Although it would seem that university students could be lumped together as a whole, for the purpose of this study, each year of the learners lives in and out of the classroom will be briefly explored in an attempt to find a fit or match with individual teacher's approaches to facilitating autonomy in their classes. All four teachers (T1, T2, T3 and T4) responded to the request for narratives in 2015. All have an interest in learner development and issues in autonomy and would consider themselves 'like-minded' in this regard.

The Narratives

The teachers were requested to write a free-form narrative concerning their views on autonomy and self-direction and how it applies in practice in their Tutoring classes. The following prompts were provided :

1. How do you approach language learning with your students? How do you 'teach' about autonomy and language learning through the Tutoring class? Has it been successful? Have you made adjustments? How and why?
2. Do you think there is a best fit between teachers and 1st, 2nd and 3rd-year Tutoring classes? Or can any one of us teach them based on our background and interest in self-access and learner independence? Describe your teaching style. Does it play a role in your expectations for the learners?
3. What's your story? How does it translate into classroom tasks and activities?

The Narratives in Practice

Linking the Narratives to Learner Lives

The impetus for this paper developed out of comments made by 3rd-year learners as they voiced discord with their teacher (T3) and the course in general in 2011. The links to learner lives begin in chronological order with the relevant threads interspersed throughout. While the narratives were written in retrospect, the fundamental teaching 'tenants' adhered to by the teacher-participants remain relevant. The first excerpts begin with the comments made by several of the learners (taken from journal notes by the author). T3 and T4 were teaching different sections of this 3rd-year Tutoring class. Narratives by T1, T3 and T4 follow. Threads from T1 are included here as he provides an interesting contrast in his approach. Notes then follow on where the 3rd-year learners were in their lives outside of the classroom.

Voices from Year 3 Tutoring

Learner Voices
- We want more time to talk to each other, not just do busy work during class time . . . and [there is] too much homework!
- . . . too much, the other class is more 'free' (*in reference to T4's section*).
- It is not fair for us. We should be the same.

Teacher Narratives
- I'm better when methodical and organized as activities and tasks connect together more meaningfully and efficiently/effectively. I like to have a plan for each lesson . . . this actually enables me to be more flexible and 'see the road ahead' (T3).
- I like learners to be organized and/or try to be (T3).
- I tend to give the students more freedom than maybe they are ready for (T4).
- I think I give students more control [over their learning] and earlier, than most teachers (T1).
- . . . it's important to err on the side of giving up control too soon, rather than being over-cautious and holding on to it (T1).

Learner Lives
- Fewer required courses; fewer classes overall
- Job-hunting activities begin in earnest
- 3rd-year-year research seminar courses begin
- More flexibility over time schedule

Most of the learner comments focus on the constraints imposed upon them in terms of accountability for assignments, use of classroom time and the course load. The comments stemmed from what they viewed as unfair when compared to

their T4 peers, and in the learner training they had experienced in two previous years of Tutoring classes. Indeed there appeared to be a mismatch between teacher approach and learner lives in T3's classroom. In particular, his approach did not seem to match the learners' expected degree of freedom and self-direction in the classroom. His comments point to the need for control (as a teacher) in order to be more flexible with the learners. But the "methodical and organized activities and tasks" did not bode well with the learners who were more willing to take control of their learning and their lives. Most 3rd-year-year students are in the throes of post-graduation job hunting ; have few required courses and more flexibility in their time schedules ; and begin research seminar classes which are by nature, independent study-oriented. This flexibility and independence in their daily lives should have been reflected with more autonomy in their language learning lives. In contrast, comments by T1 and T4 indicate their willingness to err on the side of less control. For T1 this applied even in his approach to teaching 1st-year learners. It is also interesting to note that T3 and T4 had coordinated their syllabi but their approaches were likely different, as T4's class produced no negative feedback. Benson's (2008) reminder that learners' learning can be constrained by the teacher when it is disconnected from the real lives of the learners seems to hold weight in this instance. One can see the need to reconnect learner autonomy to autonomy in life, rather than to specific autonomous behaviors that the teachers may hope for.

Changes to the Teaching Line-up

　　When looking at the lives of 1st-year university students who, 1) are transitioning from a much more controlled high school learning environment ; 2) tend to take on a full course load with the aim of completing as many credits as possible early on and ; 3) are just learning to deal with more freedom over their schedules and lives ; it follows to have a teacher that can provide more structure and guidance as they move along the autonomy continuum. Thus, beginning with the assumption that learners require more support in the early stages of their journey towards learner independence, and after much discussion amongst the team of teachers, T3 was deemed to be a better fit for 1st-year Tutoring, and T1 with the 3rd-years. T4 was taken off the Tutoring roster in order to devote more time to individual advising. This combination continued for the next two years (2012-13). T3 seemed to find a good place to channel his need for organization, planning and efficiency while T1 was comfortable with yielding control and challenging learners' autonomy as necessary.

Trouble in Paradise

　　At the end of the 2013 academic year T3 left the university. This shifted the 1st-year Tutoring class to T4 in 2014. As excerpts from T4's narrative point out, the year one learners proved to be quite a challenge.

　　Teacher Narrative (T4)

　　• I was a very motivated and reflective student and I tend to forget that all students aren't like that.

　　• What I was 'teaching' wasn't concrete. I wasn't delivering material so much as offering a framework. I suspect that the course didn't meet students' expectations, coming straight out of high school.

　　• Maybe I asked students for too much autonomy on a 1st-year course

　　His dismay seemed to focus on the fact that the majority of the learners just were not 'getting it' and simply going through the motions of what they perceived to be the requirements for the course. This stands in sharp contrast to the level of satisfaction on the part of the 3rd-year learners with T4 back in 2011. Even though both T3 and T4 used the same syllabus when teaching the 3rd-years, and even though T4 based his course on T3's 2013 syllabus, the feedback from the learners in 2011 and the frustration conveyed by T4 with the 1st-years in 2014 clearly points to some sort of mismatch. Too much autonomy too soon was not working ; too little autonomy later on had also proven problematic.

Second-year Tutoring and T2

　　Up to this point the focus has been on T1, T3, T4 and the 1st and 3rd-year Tutoring courses but what about the 2nd-year classes and T2? Extracts from learner comments taken from an in-class survey and T2's narrative seem to point to a

relatively good match. The learners seem satisfied with the degree of challenge and support provided during this time in their lives.

Learner Voices

• This is very busy class. [T2] give many work but I understand. It is good for my English study.

• Sometimes I can't do EC [online program] everyday because of part-time job. I'm very busy.

Teacher Narratives (T2)

• Maybe they don't always know what they should know.

• It's important to explain the purpose of a task and how exactly it helps with their language learning.

• . . . it's important to give learners something to fall back on, something to restore their confidence and motivation

Learner Lives

• Some required courses but more flexibility, electives

• Part-time jobs, clubs, circles, relationships

• Enjoying the freedom of their university years

T2 acknowledges the importance of informing learners on exactly how particular tasks help with their language learning. She believes that if they understand the pedagogy behind the tasks then they are more likely to do it. Successful learner stories of near peers (upperclass students and graduates) are shared in an effort to provide a possible picture of their "future selves" in an imagined community (Norton, 2001). T2 refers to this as "information-driven choice". While there is structure in the classroom in terms of required tasks, the learners are given the opportunity to explore different ways to address particular skills. This approach seems to sync with their lives outside of the classroom as they begin to make decisions regarding part-time jobs, are getting involved in more club and social activities and are enjoying the freedom of their university years. It is also a time when many students could get 'lost' in their relative freedom and need a base to return to where they can start again or carry on at their own pace in their language studies.

Discussion

While some difficulties in implementing learner autonomy in the classroom can be explained as mismatches between teacher style and learner stage, in particular the mismatch between a group of students needing direction and a non-directive teacher or between a group of students needing less direction and a directive teacher, this could end up being a rather simplistic view. How then, do teachers' beliefs constrain learner autonomy, intentionally or unintentionally? This is likely to involve teachers in considering their own longstanding beliefs about the nature of learning, and in particular about the roles of teachers and learners and the impact this may have on their agenda for autonomy in language learning.

Teacher-as-Learner Experiences

A point to consider here is how much teachers are influenced in their teaching by how they reacted as learners themselves. T2 comments, "As a learner, I resisted being told to do things in a certain way," a statement that undoubtedly affects her approach to providing learners with agency and choice rather than pushing content and her own agenda. T4 also alludes to his own learning experiences when he states, "I was a very motivated and reflective student and I tend to forget that all students aren't like that," pointing to some of the problems he had with his 1st-year students in assuming that most students were like him. These teacher-as-learner experiences might be seen as reflections of the "learners within the teachers". Recognition of this may allow teachers the freedom to innovate but adjust accordingly by reflecting on the nature of their own learning experiences and their own identities as autonomous learners.

Teachers as Adapters and Learners

In this small, reflective project, we have seen the challenges when the teacher's approach to a course on autonomy in

language learning does not coincide with where the learners' are in their lives outside of the classroom. While it would be easy enough to simply match the teacher to the course, this is not the catch-all solution not only because it is close to impossible to schedule teachers accordingly but more so for fear of pigeon-holing teachers in their practice and learners in their learning. The teachers themselves state their willingness to teach different years even though they might be better suited to a particular year as can be seen in the following comments :

- Well, there is a kind of natural "fit" . . . in the sense of our own perspectives and inclinations with regard to degree of scaffolding . . . as they move from 1st to 3rd-year. But that doesn't mean we can't teach different years (T1).
- I've always taught 2nd-year Tutoring so there must be some sort of good fit here. However, I would love the opportunity to teach the other years as I want to better understand our students and be a more informed teacher (T2).
- . . . any of us could teach them but the outcomes would likely be different as we'd colour things a bit differently (T3).
- I suppose some teachers are better suited to different year levels but I also think that successful teachers adapt and learn from their mistakes (T4).

If reflective teachers are autonomous teachers and show a desire to develop professionally then it can be assumed that all of the teachers in this study are such. This is in accord with Thavenius (1999) who defined an autonomous teacher as one who promotes learner autonomy, can reflect on her role as a teacher and change it accordingly . . . she would have the ability to help her learners become autonomous, and be independent enough to *let* them become independent (p.160).

Teacher autonomy can only be achieved by teachers working together since only through dialog can they be stimulated to operate in new and different ways. Little (1995) emphasizes this point succinctly :

Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflections and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers (p.179).

Conclusion

As a teacher (T2) and the author of this study, it is reassuring to know that I teach alongside colleagues who find teaching challenges to be a source of stimulation and reward. Like our learners, the teachers do not want to pigeonhole themselves as a particular type of teacher but rather to stretch themselves professionally. This, I believe, is a reflection of how we want to be treated ourselves as teachers and as learners. Thus, while there may be a good 'match' between teachers and learners, the quantity and quality of challenge and support we provide at any given time must be met with the flexibility to maneuver, or increase and decrease the degrees of both according to the fluid conditions of our teaching context and our learners' lives.

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