

Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy and the Process of Becoming a Pro-autonomy Teacher: Theoretical Perspectives and Life Stories of Six Teachers of Japanese as a Second Language

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Summary

In this thesis I explore how teachers may develop their understanding of and a positive attitude towards learner autonomy. Part 1 of the thesis consists of two chapters. In Chapter 1 I compare definitions of learner autonomy found in the relevant literature and examine how theorists differ in their interpretation of the term. The discrepancies are attributed to 1) the social context in which each author works, 2) the fact that our understanding of learner autonomy is always tentative and in flux, and 3) loose definitions of some technical terms in psychology. I do not make any value judgement of existing definitions because each must be evaluated against the context in which it is put to use and examining each context was beyond the scope of the present thesis. I give, instead, the definition of learner autonomy I have developed in my work context and elaborate on it. For me, learner autonomy is a modular capacity that exists in relation to others and in one's social context, allowing one to make choices concerning one's own learning in the service of one's wishes and aspirations. My definition emphasizes the interdependent nature of learner autonomy and social and affective as well as cognitive aspects of the concept. In Chapter 2 I review the literature on the teacher's role in the development of learner autonomy. A common claim in these writings is that learning to support the development of second language learner autonomy involves much more than acquiring a new set of knowledge/skills. It entails acquiring a particular kind of personal quality. My review of second language teacher educators' accounts of their practice indicates that many

treat reflective practice, action research and teacher autonomy almost as synonymous. The successes which those practitioners claim are found to be either rather limited or not fully specified. The rest of the chapter examines the concepts of reflective practice, action research and teacher autonomy separately and discusses their relevance to teachers' capacity to support learner autonomy.

Part 2 of the thesis comprises eight chapters. Chapter 3 describes the research procedure and explains the rationale behind my choices. I chose Polkinghorne's (1988; 1995) narrative analysis as my research methodology, but with some modifications. Six teachers of Japanese as a second language who in my view have a positive attitude towards learner autonomy were interviewed twice about significant events and people that influenced their thinking about learner autonomy. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and edited. The edited transcriptions were checked by each interviewee. Then a story starting from each teacher's childhood and running through to the present was written by the present author and checked by each teacher. Each of Chapters 4 to 9 presents a life story. In Chapter 10 I draw together the threads of the six stories and claim 1) that the kind of commitment pro-autonomy teachers have is commitment of self to learners; 2) that the seed of this commitment is likely to be the development of their personal autonomy, their early interest in and empathic understanding of what may be called the foreign, social awareness, and autonomous foreign language learning experience; and 3) that the factors which may accelerate the process of becoming a pro-autonomy teacher include observing and talking to learners, teacher autonomy as freedom, supportive colleagues and teacher educators, and knowledge of some academic disciplines and other genres of relevant literature. Based on these claims I suggest 1) that participation in a teacher education programme specifically focused on learner autonomy should be voluntary; 2) that interest in foreign and social awareness may be screening criteria, where possible,

while second language competence, degree of personal autonomy and commitment to the profession may not make good criteria; and 3) that one way to develop the required commitment in teachers may be to build a community of learner autonomy practitioners in which pre-service teachers and newly initiated in-service teachers can participate. I also offer some recommendations on curriculum and teaching practicum and emphasize the need to cultivate teachers' narrative knowledge. In concluding the thesis I suggest that rewriting a curriculum is not enough to change educational practice in favour of learner autonomy.