

To be published in *The Language Teacher* (June, 2001), as a 'taster' for a featured speaker workshop at the JALT International Conference, November 2001, Kita-Kyushu.

### Learner and Teacher Development: Connections and Constraints

Richard C. Smith

The last decade has seen the rise of learner autonomy and reflective teaching as 'buzz words' in our profession. They have tended to be considered separately, but in recent publications and conferences there has been a growing tendency to link the two. I shall attempt to indicate in this article both why learner and teacher development can be seen ideally as two sides of the same coin, and how different settings place constraints on their implementation which have to be realistically addressed. Only then are (pedagogy for) learner autonomy and reflective teaching likely to become more than buzz words, in other words take root in different contexts and be sustained.

The learner autonomy and reflective teaching paradigms clearly share an emphasis on the importance of constructing one's own knowledge through planning, monitoring and self-evaluation, and may thus be seen to reflect trends in general learning psychology, at the same time as meeting increasingly urgent economic and social demands for flexibility and life-long learning. Both can have a political connotation, too, with their shared emphasis on empowerment of the individual (student or teacher) in relation to existing social, including educational structures, though with their rise to prominence as buzz words this political dimension may have tended to be downplayed.

In the classroom, though, why might there be a necessary connection between learner and teacher development? It seems to me that this has something to do with the investigative stance adopted by the reflective teacher (the 'teacher as researcher'), a stance which may be *required* by the demands of a pedagogy for autonomy. As a student I taught in Japan once wrote, when students acquire more control over classroom learning, the role of the teacher may appear – at first sight – to be diminished. But, in fact, the teacher needs to involve him/herself in 'grasping every student's aim and seeing how they are doing . . . He/she has to look [at] students carefully to understand their ideas towards learning and give appropriate advice to them' (Takamatsu 1996). In this process of attempting to understand and advise students, teachers are likely to be engaged in various investigative activities, asking questions which are themselves useful in raising students' awareness of their own learning. And in order to engage students in autonomous and effective reflection on their learning, teachers need to constantly reflect on their own role in the classroom, monitoring the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students' thinking and behaviour.

## References

Moreira, M.A., F. Vieira and I. Marques. (1999). Pre-service teacher development through action research. *The Language Teacher*, 23/12: 15–18, 36.

Takamatsu, Y. (1996). Unpublished "End-of-year critical course evaluation", quoted with permission.

Vieira, F. (1997). Pedagogy for autonomy: exploratory answers to questions any teacher should ask. In Müller-Verweyen, M. (ed.) *Neues Lernen Selbstgesteuert Autonom*. Munich: Goethe-Institut, 53-72.