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# **Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions**

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## 8 Starting With Ourselves: Teacher-Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

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### Introduction

What is *teacher* autonomy? Why is it important? And how can it be enhanced? These are the broad questions I wish to address in this article. Teacher autonomy has not yet been much discussed in relation to second language education, and so I begin by offering one possible definition, viewing teacher autonomy in relation to teacher-learning. I then suggest some reasons why development of 'teacher-learner autonomy' is likely to be important in its own right, as well as in relation to the development of learner autonomy with students. Next, I attempt to show more concretely how my views have emerged from teacher-learner development work in a particular context, describing the establishment and activities of a network of teacher-learners of Japanese in Japan. I then generalise beyond this particular example, considering how teachers' professional language learning needs are likely to vary according to teaching context, and 'type' of teacher. Taking account of these variations, I conclude with some practical suggestions for the development of teacher-learner autonomy in language learning.

### One view of teacher autonomy

#### *Teacher-learner autonomy*

To date, the few characterisations of teacher autonomy in the second language education literature have tended to refer to teachers' control (including freedom from external control) over their own teaching. Thus, Little (1995:179) describes how teachers may be

autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers.

Tort-Moloney (1997) mainly adopts a similar position. At one point, however, she indicates an alternative perspective when she defines the autonomous teacher as 'one who is aware of why, when, where and how pedagogical skills

can be *acquired* in the self-conscious awareness of teaching practice itself' (Tort-Moloney, 1997:51; emphasis added). Here, stress is laid on teachers' capacity to control their own *learning* of teaching, and on the importance of reflection on teacher-learning as well as on teaching itself. In further pursuit of this insight, I would like to suggest here that we can indeed see teachers as *learners* (in a variety of areas, including, though not confined to, Tort-Moloney's 'pedagogical skills'), and thus – viewing ourselves in the mirror, as it were – consider the nature and extent of our own 'learner autonomy', in the same way as we might wish to assess this capacity in our students. It is possible, then, to define teacher autonomy at least partially in terms of the 'teacher's autonomy as a learner', or – more succinctly – 'teacher-learner autonomy', making use of already familiar definitions of learner autonomy such as the following:

Learner [here, teacher-learner] autonomy is characterised by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a social[ly] responsible person. (1989 'Bergen definition', cited by Dam, 1990:17)

For present purposes, one major advantage of defining teacher autonomy in these relatively familiar terms is that we can move on quickly to consider why this capacity might be important and how, in practice, it could be enhanced.

#### *Why might teacher-learner autonomy be important?*

Little (1995:180) has suggested that 'language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous', while Vieira (1997a:66) has observed that 'teachers become more reflective as learners become more autonomous and vice versa'. It seems plausible to suggest, also, that reflection on our own autonomy, lack of autonomy or attempts to achieve autonomy as learners might provide us with important insights for learner development work with students. Here, though, I would like to advance what may be an even stronger claim for the value of teacher-learner autonomy, placing emphasis on its intrinsic importance to us as teachers.

One *leitmotiv* of recent work in the field of teacher education is that learning constitutes an important part not only of becoming but also of continuing to be a teacher (see, for example, Freeman and Richards, 1996 and McGrath, this volume). If this is the case, then learner autonomy is likely to be as necessary for ourselves (as teacher trainees, teachers or teacher trainers) as we consider it to be for language students. As teacher trainees, after all, we *are* students. And when we become teachers or teacher trainers, any further professional development is likely to be largely self-directed (with the exception of in-service training provided 'for' us). The enhancement of our own readiness, capacities and control in relevant areas of teacher-learning can therefore be argued to have an intrinsic value.

#### *Teacher-learner autonomy in language learning*

Below, I will provide more concrete detail to support the suggestions made so far, attempting to show within just one important, though frequently neglected area of teacher-learning – the learning of languages by teachers themselves –

why the importance of enhancing teacher-learner autonomy may deserve to be more widely recognised.

For reasons of space, I will focus narrowly in this article on second language learning by teachers, although there are of course other equally, and perhaps more obviously important areas of teacher-learning and teacher-learner autonomy (in particular in relation to the acquisition of pedagogical skills) which will need to be explored in the future.

A more personal reason for focusing on language learning by teachers is that my own interest in learner autonomy has partly developed out of experience with and reflection on teacher-learner development work in this particular area, as will become clear below. Another reason has to do with a conviction, also arising from this work, that language teacher bilingualism is too frequently neglected as a feature of professional competence, in favour, for example, of pedagogical skills. This argument will also be expanded upon below.

## A network of teacher language learners

### *Background*

The idea for the network of teacher language learners focused on here first came from one participant in a workshop entitled 'Japanese for Lazy People' which I facilitated with Trevor Hughes Parry at the 1992 JALT (Japan Association for Language Teaching) Conference. The workshop was attended by around fifty conference-goers, almost all of them, like ourselves, native-speaker English teachers based in Japan. The interest generated by the workshop seemed to confirm our working hypothesis that a perceived *lack* of autonomy in the area of Japanese learning (*operationalised* by us at the time as 'laziness') would be characteristic of at least some of our non-Japanese colleagues, and that at least some of them would desire to overcome perceived failings in this area. Indeed, participants themselves appeared to feel that the experience of sharing ideas, stories and feelings at the workshop itself had been worthwhile enough to be prolonged via regular newsletter contact (this suggestion was not premeditated on our part but was volunteered by one participant, Jonathan Golin).

Accordingly, the three of us (Golin, Hughes Parry and Smith) compiled the first issue of a newsletter, which we decided to call *Learner to Learner*. In January 1993 we sent this issue to workshop participants and other colleagues who had expressed an interest, with the following statement of intent appearing on the front page:

Many learners . . . are not particularly motivated to attend formal language classes, or are unable to do so, but nevertheless feel frustrated by their lack of progress in Japanese . . . we envisage the newsletter as a forum where all of us can share ideas on an equal and open basis. (Golin, Hughes Parry and Smith, 1993:1)

### *Developments and implications*

For a period of two years, an eight-page newsletter continued to be produced and sent out bi-monthly, with readership reaching a peak of around 70 at the

end of the first year. Over these two years, *Learner to Learner* featured contributions in English from a total of thirty-four different correspondents, with the editorship being rotated among five people in all.

One of the editors (Hughes Parry, 1995:2-4) has described the contents of contributions to the newsletter during this period under the following headings: (1) ideas for breaking down one's learning into *steps*; (2) expression of *emotions and beliefs* connected with Japanese language learning, and (3) sharing of various *strategies* for learning. Some of the particular ideas, emotions and beliefs shared in these areas have previously been summarised and discussed in Japanese (Smith, Hughes Parry and Aoki, 1995; Smith, 1996), for the benefit of teachers of that language. Here, then, I would like to consider lessons of a more general nature which might be gained from this largely unpremeditated example of innovation in teacher-learner development.

One point which emerged strongly is that native speaker teachers of one language do not necessarily see themselves as – indeed, may not necessarily be – autonomous or otherwise 'good' second language learners themselves. In fact, regardless of their level of proficiency, many contributors appeared to have experienced feelings of stress, shame, frustration, isolation, marginalisation, disempowerment and even anger in connection with their inability to use or learn the language dominant in the society they were working in. Avoidance of learning had previously been a common response to such feelings, with emotions of guilt and a frustrating sense of fossilisation being commonly perceived to result (Smith, 1996). Thus, one of the newsletter editors was able to sum up the overall tenor of contributions to *Learner to Learner* in its first year as follows:

Many of us have some feelings of embarrassment and guilt and other uncomfortable emotions associated with our Japanese language learning – as a result, for example, of our not living up to our own standards and being as diligent with our language study as we intended. (Golin, 1993:9)

Gaining control over language learning was acknowledged by these teachers to be important to their general well-being in the Japanese context. In addition, the reflection on Japanese language learning which the network enabled appears to have been appreciated for reasons which related more specifically to English teaching. Some participants noted how their lack of abilities in Japanese contributed to frustrations at work (in particular in relation to lack of access to important information). Others emphasised advantages of being able to use or at least refer to students' mother tongue in their teaching, while several contributors volunteered more general reflections connecting their learning of Japanese with their English language teaching. Thus, one correspondent remarked: 'there's nothing like being a student, to see things through the students' eyes, *acutely* aware of (un-met) learning needs' (Winter, 1993:6; emphasis in original). More positively, another reported that reflection on her experience as a learner of Japanese had led her to 'look at [her] own students in a different way', becoming 'more flexible with class-time, more patient with prompting, and less eager to correct errors on the spot' (Ledebøer, 1993:4).

There were, then, more than a few indications in the pages of *Learner to*

*Learner* that active contributors saw value in being enabled to confront their failings in a supportive context, reflect on their learning (or lack of learning), and borrow ideas suggested by fellow teacher-learners, not only in their own learning but also for their work with students.

### A wider perspective

On the basis of the above description, I now wish to widen the discussion by considering why the development of teacher-learner autonomy in language learning might be important more generally, and why its importance has nevertheless received so little attention in the past.

#### *Varieties of teacher language learning*

Theorising of language (in particular, perhaps, English language) teaching and teacher education for the global market has typically been marred by over-generalisation from native to non-native speaker teacher experience, and from 'central' to 'periphery' contexts (Medgyes, 1992, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994). It seems important, then, to acknowledge that different 'types' of teacher in different contexts are likely to have quite different professional needs with regard to their own language learning.

Accordingly, in the diagram on the next page I offer a classification of language teachers into four 'types', extending Medgyes's (1992, 1994) differentiation between the basic linguistic capabilities of native speaker teachers (NSTs) and non-native speaker teachers (NNSTs) by considering how this differentiation intersects with the nature of the context in which teaching takes place. Thus, teachers in a society where use of the target language predominates (termed 'in centre') are differentiated from those elsewhere ('in periphery'). The labels 'centre' and 'periphery' are borrowed from Phillipson (1992), but are used here in a sociolinguistic as much as a political sense. Thus, on the basis of my own experience as a native speaker teacher of English in Japan ('in periphery' in the sense that English is not widely spoken outside the classroom), I classify myself and my colleagues in the *Learner to Learner* network described above as being of a 'type': i.e. 'Type B', which is different from 'Type A' NSTs of English in the UK, USA, etc. The Japanese teachers of English who are my colleagues would be placed in another, quite different category, 'Type C', while a Japanese teacher of English in, for example, a Japanese school or college in the UK would be termed a 'Type D' teacher.

The left hand column of the diagram represents in diagrammatic form Medgyes' (1992, 1994) argument that, whereas NNSTs tend to suffer from weaknesses in their *know-how in* (ability to use) the target language, NSTs tend to lack *knowledge about* it. The central column corresponds to Medgyes's suggestion that NSTs are likely to suffer from a lack of proficiency in the language(s) of their students, and that NNSTs are more likely to be advantaged in this area. (However, I have indicated with question marks that NNSTs do not always share the language(s) of (all of) their students.) As I have added in the right hand column, Type B and Type D teachers will also tend to lack proficiency in the language which is dominant in the wider society outside the classroom,

	Target language	Students' languages	Dominant language
<b>Type A</b> (NST 'in centre')	+ know-how in	—	+
<b>Type B</b> (NST 'in periphery')	— knowledge about	—	—
<b>Type C</b> (NNST 'in periphery')	+ knowledge about	+ ?	+
<b>Type D</b> (NNST 'in centre')	— know-how in	+ ?	—

**Figure 1** Areas of likely linguistic strength (+) and weakness (—) for different 'types' of language teacher

including, frequently, within the educational institution itself (in the case of Type B teachers, this language is often the students' mother tongue). It was a desire for self-improvement in this area which most appeared to motivate the (Type B) participants in the *Learner to Learner* network described above.

#### *Needs for teacher language learning*

What might be the implications of the above model for teacher education work with different types of teacher? Firstly, I shall refer to the case of Type A teachers and teacher trainers, since the 'central' literature in language teaching (that is, literature published in a central context and exported to the 'periphery') so often appears to reflect their (linguistic) interests. The following might be suggested: (1) Type A teachers are likely to feel less pressure than Type B teachers to learn students' L1, since it is their own mother tongue which is dominant in the surrounding society; (2) in any case, students in their classes may tend to have a variety of mother tongues, which – it is easy to claim – are not *all* learnable, or indeed usable in the classroom; and (3) as a consequence of (1) and (2), second language learning is likely to be perceived by Type A teachers as far less necessary for their own professional purposes than it may be by Type B, C and D teachers. This combination of factors may explain why so little attention has been paid previously in the (central) literature to issues of second language learning by teachers. In other words, even though the vast majority of language teachers are of Types B, C and D, their special linguistic needs have tended to be downplayed in 'central' approaches to language teacher education. Freeman and Johnson (1998), for example, fail to consider language knowledge or know-how as part of 'the' knowledge base for second language teacher education, privileging instead factors such as 'pedagogical thinking and activity'; (see, however, Edge, 1988, and Cullen, 1994, for alternative viewpoints).



Medgyes (1983, 1992, 1994), is one of the few writers to have laid stress on the need for NNST weaknesses in the area of L2 'know-how' to be confronted, since, he emphasises, teaching approaches which involve relatively free use of the target language in the classroom can only be built on a firm foundation of teacher proficiency in this area. A major second thrust of Medgyes's argument, though, is that NSTs as well as NNSTs need to confront their linguistic weaknesses. Just as NNSTs can only, he suggests, overcome a sense of professional inferiority by means of (lifelong) language learning, so the 'ideal' NST will be one who not only gains explicit knowledge with regard to the target language but also achieves 'a high degree of proficiency in the learners' mother tongue' (Medgyes, 1992:348). In this manner NSTs can attempt to gain some of the several advantages which Medgyes (re)claims for NNSTs, including the ability to 'anticipate language difficulties', 'be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners', and exploit potential pedagogical benefits of being able to use the learners' L1 in class (see Harbord, 1992, and Atkinson, 1993, for practical suggestions in the latter area).

One of the many positive features of Medgyes's work, it seems to me, is the encouragement and direction he thus offers not only to NNSTs but also to NSTs to transcend their different limitations, and work towards convergence. Just as some NNSTs may need to learn to overcome feelings of guilt and associated 'forms of contorted teaching practice' (Medgyes, 1992:348) whereby use of the target language (and potential exposure of teacher weakness) is avoided in class, it might be suggested, although Medgyes politely refrains from making this point too strongly, that NST arrogance with regard both to NNST colleagues' teaching practices and to students' L1 and culture(s) can be overcome most appropriately via recognition of and attempts to resolve weaknesses in their own L2 proficiency (weaknesses which may partly motivate, for example, 'target language only' policies in the classroom, Auerbach, 1993). The awareness-raising involved here might be important in opening up a path to genuinely learner-centred teaching and trainee-centred teacher education by Type A and B teachers; in other words, to the possibility of appropriate methodology (Holliday, 1994) in these areas.

As I have already implied, for Type B teachers the language dominant in the outside (including, in many cases, the institutional) environment is likely at the same time to be students' L1, and so can be seen as doubly worth learning, for professional as well as personal purposes. The former purposes might include, for example, gaining access to important information within the workplace, negotiating on behalf of students, and, generally, gaining linguistic or cultural insights which enable one to teach in a more locally appropriate manner.

#### *Importance of and obstacles to teacher-learner autonomy*

I have argued (building, in the light of my own experience, on previous work by Medgyes) that language learning can be seen to have great potential significance for language teachers of various 'types', although specific areas of most necessary learning will vary from teacher to teacher (and context to context). I have also argued that teacher-learning of languages has not tended to receive the attention it deserves within 'central' teacher education, which tends to

relate most strongly to Type A teacher / teacher trainer perspectives.

The role of teacher-learner autonomy in this area is, then, likely to be crucial, partly because issues of language learning by teachers may not have been addressed in our own teacher preparation (to the extent that this has been influenced by 'centre' perspectives), and partly, also, because teacher-learning in general is inevitably a career-long, largely self-directed enterprise.

The *Learner to Learner* experiment seems to offer some insights into obstacles which need to be overcome on the road to teacher-learner autonomy, although it is by no means presented here as a 'model' for teacher-learner development. We have seen how this network was perceived to fulfill a useful role in overcoming the sense of isolation experienced by some Type B teacher-learners of Japanese in Japan who had hitherto tended to avoid confronting their weaknesses in this area. Just as Medgyes (1992:348) views language proficiency development by NNSTs as actually 'hampered . . . by a state of constant stress and insecurity caused by inadequate knowledge of the language they are paid to teach', similar feelings of stress and insecurity with regard to lack of acquisition and inability to use the dominant community language can, it seems, be quite powerful for and similarly avoided by at least some Type B teachers.

Of course, the professional identity of NNSTs is much more seriously threatened by revelation of weakness in the area of L2 know-how, and it might be the case that many NNSTs also learn to rationalise or hide their weaknesses, so closing themselves off to the possibility of improvement (see Medgyes, 1983 for some indications that this might be the case). It seems very important, then, to investigate further the patterns of avoidance which might operate in this area in order to find better ways to develop teacher-learner autonomy in NNST as well as NST language learning, in spite of the obstacles.

#### *Possibilities for teacher-learner development*

One way in which teacher autonomy in language learning could be enhanced might simply be for its importance to be more widely recognised and emphasised within initial and in-service teacher education, and in teacher education research. Teacher trainees and practising teachers might then feel more encouraged to tackle language learning for themselves. I hope that this article will contribute in a small way to raising the issue of teacher autonomy in language learning to more general prominence.

Peer support involving sharing of emotions as well as ideas connected with language learning seems to have been of value in the *Learner to Learner* experiment as an antidote to previous isolation, hiding of frustrations and lack of confidence in the area of Japanese language learning. Practising teachers in other contexts might (or might not!) find inspiration in this example to confront language learning problems relevant to themselves, perhaps in collaboration with colleagues who are facing similar problems.

More formalised teacher-learner development arrangements could presumably also involve collaborative support of this nature. Specific suggestions in relation to teacher education for Type C teacher trainees will be offered in the following section, where I can report on practice with Japanese students preparing to be English teachers (and the way this has been influenced by my

own reflection on Japanese language learning). With regard to the preparation of NSTs, I can only speculate, on the basis of gaps which I now perceive in my own training, that the following types of arrangement might have been useful:

- 1 Second language improvement or awareness-raising components involving a large degree of (negotiated) self-direction, including choice of the language to be studied. Reflection on the process of learning could be encouraged with the practical aim in mind of developing teacher-learners' own autonomy as second language learners, for purposes of future learning.
- 2 A greater emphasis could be placed on how students' L1 can profitably be used in the classroom both by teachers and learners (to counteract what Phillipson, 1992:185-93, terms the 'monolingual fallacy' which tends to characterise 'centre' perspectives).
- 3 Potential NST (trainee) arrogance might also be countered via exercises specifically involving sensitisation to (future) NNST colleagues' linguistic advantages and weaknesses (this is likely to be of particular importance for Type B teachers, whose work often complements that of NNSTs).
- 4 Additionally (or, when time is limited, alternatively), there might be real value in encouraging reflection and discussion of trainees' previous language learning histories, not only with regard to their relationship to teaching styles (see Bailey *et al.*, 1996), but also in order to help develop teachers' autonomy as language learners (this suggestion is offered on the grounds that personal stories were particularly favoured as a genre by *Learner to Learner* contributors).

As Flowerdew (1998) recognises, the idea of incorporating reflection on language learning experience into teacher education is not a new one (indeed, see Palmer, 1935). However, such reflection is normally considered to be useful not for addressing 'real' problems of language learning by teachers but, rather, for developing 'insights into ... students' learning processes and thereby informing ... teaching' (Flowerdew, 1998:530; see also Lowe, 1987). Waters *et al.* (1990) have identified motivational problems which can arise from the simulated nature of 'the language-learning experience' in teacher education, while Golebiowska (1985) has entered a plea for the language taught to be relevant to teachers' real needs. Like Golebiowska, I have been emphasising that the most useful 'learning about learning' by teachers might develop out of 'necessary' experiences, relating to teachers' real needs for language learning. As one participant in the *Learner to Learner* network put it:

Even though we share many similarities in our learning of Japanese that our students have in their learning of English, I believe there are enough differences that justify the existence of a support group for coping with the obstacles that we normally encounter (as learners of a language). If we focus too much on our own learners, we will be viewing things from a teacher's point of view. (Einwaechter, 1994:1)

*Teacher and learner development: only connect!*

In this article I have mostly focused on the intrinsic value of developing teacher-learner autonomy, and it is primarily on this basis that I have suggested some ways in which teacher education and development could be enhanced (in particular in relation to second language learning by NSTs). Now, finally, I shall return to the issue of teacher preparation for the development of students' autonomy, suggesting from my own experience that 'starting with ourselves' as language learners can have a positive influence in this area.

With regard to my own development as a teacher and teacher educator in the Japanese context, reflection on and development of control over my Japanese language learning (in particular, via participation in the *Learner to Learner* network) appears to me now to have had the following effects:

- 1 In the context of my English teaching in a Japanese university, I increasingly encouraged sharing and peer-counselling among students with regard to language learning ideas, emotions, resources and strategies (as had occurred among teachers in the *Learner to Learner* network), and I became increasingly appreciative of the value of this type of 'bottom-up', collaborative approach to the enhancement of learner autonomy, as contrasted with the top-down provision of ideas deriving from research in other contexts. Partly, this involved a growing awareness that learners of English in Japan (a *foreign* language learning context) can and often do exploit authentic resources for outside-class learning in ways comparable to those reported by *second* language learners of Japanese in the same setting (see Smith, Hughes Parry and Aoki, 1995; Smith, forthcoming). Following attempts to set relatively short-term goals for my own Japanese language learning in the early days of *Learner to Learner*, I also began to encourage students to consider their own goals for English learning and work independently and cooperatively towards them (see Smith, 1998, forthcoming).
- 2 I feel also that becoming more aware of some of the obstacles to teacher-learner autonomy in my own experience and that of other 'Type B' teacher-learners has led me to understand better, by extension, both the linguistic problems faced by NNSTs and the potential advantages (as learners of the target language themselves) which they possess in relation to learner development with students. In my courses for 'Type C' teacher trainees, I have accordingly introduced reflective writing and discussion with regard to the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom and in relation to trainees' ongoing and future learning of English for teaching purposes. I have also developed the expectation that, via continuing reflection on their own language learning, teacher trainees might in turn become encouraged and better enabled to develop their students' as well as their own autonomy in second language learning, into the future.

The experience of collaborative reflection on second language learning has, then, had significant effects on my own teaching and teacher education work, quite apart from assisting me in developing my Japanese language abilities.

Although in this article I have mainly argued in favour of the intrinsic value of developing teacher-learner autonomy in language learning, I end up with the suggestion that there may be a strong, as yet under-investigated connection between 'starting with ourselves' and the development of our ability to enhance *students'* (including teacher trainees') autonomy as language learners.

### Future directions

In this article I have attempted to define 'teacher-learner autonomy' and to establish the intrinsic importance both of teacher-learning of languages and of teacher-learner autonomy in this area. The discussion has necessarily been wide-ranging, although I have attempted to anchor theoretical speculation in description of a particular Japanese experiment in teacher-learner development, and in additional descriptions of its effect on my own language teaching and teacher education work in Japan.

I hope that the particular focus on 'teacher-learner autonomy' which I have proposed here and my emphasis on the need to develop this capacity may enable further connections to be made between the pursuit of learner autonomy and ongoing work in the overall area of (second language) teacher education. Possible areas of practice and research suggested by the emphasis on teacher language learning in this article might include in-depth investigations of different types of teachers' learning needs and difficulties, and of the effects of teacher-learner development work on their attitudes both to their own language learning and to the enhancement of students' autonomy. Another focus of investigation might be on how teacher-learner autonomy can be encouraged in other, more obviously relevant areas such as the development of teaching skills and the enhancement of knowledge about language, learning and teaching. Teacher-learner autonomy and development may, then, represent particularly fruitful areas for future practice and research by those with interests in learner autonomy and teacher education alike.

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