Voices　読者の声

Autonomy Big and Small

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*J*ackie Suginaga and Michael Mondejar were thrilled and honoured to meet Phil Benson, one of the plenary speakers at the JALT national conference in Tokyo last November. As Phil has been a writer and researcher at the forefront of learner autonomy for many years, we wanted to interview him to get some insight into how his interest in autonomy started, how his ideas have evolved, and what advice he could give to teachers who wish to promote learner autonomy. Sitting down over coffee, Michael started the ball rolling with an important question…

Michael: So why do you think promoting learner autonomy is important in second language acquisition?

Phil: I think it's important in learning and I think it's especially important in second language acquisition because of this idea that really there's no curriculum for a second language. If you're going to learn a second language to a high level, first of all you have to do a lot of work outside the classroom and second, everybody's going to learn in their own way, anyway. So, it's that idea that second language acquisition is a very variable thing already, whether you are introducing autonomy or not. So, I believe that autonomy is important, because that's what people need to do – they need to learn a language in their own way, to use it for what they want to use it for.

Michael: How would you respond to people who have researched first language acquisition and have stated that people's first language is acquired in stages? Wouldn't those people say that you have to structure language learning in a certain way?

Phil: Well, I don't think that that idea is incompatible with autonomy. I mean, I myself would think that if I was learning a new language, I would want to learn the tense system, I would want to learn how to make singular and plural, those basic grammatical things. That's how I was taught French at school, and there's nothing wrong with that. But I think that that's actually a very small part of learning a foreign language. So, I am not against the structure at all. I think there are some things that are better as structured. But in fact, I think that that can generally be done in a very short time. It's the development - it's going beyond that kind of beginner, intermediate stage and so on – that takes time and requires autonomy. In my own experience of teaching myself languages, I've started with a grammar book and tried to get on top of the grammar, the basic vocabulary, the kind of vocabulary you find in a list of common words. That doesn't take long, but then that's when the difficult part starts. I think you can also learn a language autonomously from the beginning. But what I'm saying really is that autonomy doesn't mean that you have to learn everything autonomously and everything in a kind of deconstructed way.

Michael: I wanted to ask you something that occurred to me when I read your book, *Teaching and Researching Autonomy*. Students who are already very motivated to learn a language, wouldn't they automatically become autonomous?

Phil: Well, I don't think they would automatically become autonomous, because that's something that schools and universities can discourage. I think institutional education often demotivates students. The biggest risk in education is that you will actually discourage the students rather than encourage them. But there is a link between motivation and autonomy, so I would agree that autonomy is perhaps more for motivated students than for less motivated students.

There are also unmotivated students, right? There are students in language classes who really don't want to learn those languages. I think autonomy means that students should be free to *not* learn a language, free to spend their time learning something else instead. We can take a step outside language learning and look at autonomy as having a choice about the kind of subjects we want to learn.

This is the thing with English language teaching though, isn't it? Everybody has to learn English, particularly in Asia. In Europe and the West, we talk about language aptitude – that is, some people are better at learning a language than other people. But in Asia, you rarely hear people talk about language aptitude. It just seems that everybody has to do it, and it's how hard you work that determines your success.

Jackie: Why did you first become interested in autonomy?

Phil: The reason why I got interested in autonomy was because I myself would prefer self-instruction. I prefer to teach myself than to go to classes. I've learned Spanish, Portuguese and Italian in this way. I tried to learn Japanese and Cantonese too but had a lot less success with those. So, I guess I am pretty autonomous myself. That's how I got interested in, first of all, self-access because when I went to Hong Kong it was to help set up a self-access center in Hong Kong University. I thought that that was a really great thing for me because this was the kind of thing that I would love to have myself. So, to help set something like that up for students was really interesting.

Michael: Could you tell us more about the self-access center?

Phil: Well, that was in the early 1990's, and at that time they expanded the university education system. These were all English-medium universities, so when they expanded by about 20%, they were very concerned about the level of the English of the students. They gave a lot of funds to the universities for what they called "language enhancement". Most of the universities at that time set up these self-access centers, with various degrees of success. I think the ones that have worked particularly well were City University, The Science and Technology University and the Polytechnic University. The one we worked in at Hong Kong University, it's been OK, but we had a lot more difficulty than the other universities in terms of trying to integrate the self-access and the teaching together. I think other universities were more successful in doing that.

Jackie: Would, for example, students research their own projects at the self-access center? And was this combined with some classroom teaching?

Phil: Yes, we tried various things. For example we had a course where 60% was classroom teaching and 40% of the course was actually set up so that you could do what you want. You could choose to complete a project yourself, you would set targets or carry out the learning yourself, and keep a record, and so on. That kind of approach was less successful because there was a lack of connection between what students were doing in the classroom, which was mainly academic writing, and what they were doing in the self-access center, which would often be at a much lower level. At other universities they developed programs that were 100% self-access, and you could get credit for that.

Michael: So there was no classroom instructor, or no classroom time?

Phil: In some cases. There was a program called the Independent Learning Program at City University, where students could opt for that. The students had to take an English course, but they could opt to take it in a classroom or they could opt to take it through self access. If they opted to take

it through self-access, I think there was no classroom instruction. There may have been a kind of a learner-training workshop, but there was no curriculum, no set of skills that you had to improve – it was all self-directed.

Jackie: But there was a teacher there for guidance?

Phil: Yes. So, say if it was a classroom course, you would have 20 students in your class. If it was a self-access course, you would also have 20 students who you were responsible for.

Michael: Was there any research in, say, gains in language proficiency?

Phil: I'm pretty sure there wasn't research on language proficiency, no. It would be really difficult to do because they were pretty short courses and the students are pretty advanced already when they go in, compared to other levels. At this age in Hong Kong, they have already done about 15 years of English classes, so it's very difficult to measure their language proficiency anyway, and then if you are looking for an improvement over 10 weeks. There are some interesting articles written by Jean Young and her colleagues about that course.

Jackie: With regards to teacher autonomy and learner autonomy, do you think that they are connected in any way?

Phil: Well, I should say that I understand what learner autonomy is. I am not sure that I, or anybody else, really understands what teacher autonomy is, in the sense that there are a number of ways that you can use that term, teacher autonomy. You can talk about whether teachers are autonomous learners or not, so that's a sort of learner autonomy of teachers, they are autonomous in their learning to teach. Then, there is teacher autonomy in the sense that they have a freedom to do and to make decisions in the classroom. So, you know, there are so many different ways to define it that it's difficult to say. I am a lot less comfortable with teacher autonomy than I am with learner autonomy.

The other problem with the idea of teacher autonomy is that if teacher autonomy means teachers having more freedom in the classroom, is that an end in itself? If teachers have more freedom in the classroom, they can use that freedom any way they want. It might not necessarily be to promote learner autonomy. So, the way I prefer to look at the whole issue is in terms of the specific constraints that prevent teachers from allowing students to be more autonomous rather than more general constraints on their own behavior.

But not everyone would agree with that. I'd be very reluctant and slow to take on this idea of teacher autonomy. I understand what people are talking about, but I think our priority here is learner autonomy, and then teacher autonomy. Yes, there's a link, but it also takes you off into other areas about teachers' lives, professional work, etc. which are not necessarily related to learner autonomy.

Michael: What do you think about this idea of filling students with knowledge, like pouring water into a vessel, versus nurturing them like a seed, providing them with the necessary conditions in which to grow?

Phil: Well, I prefer the second, but I am not sure how helpful these kinds of metaphors are. I don't know if this is a metaphor, but I like to think of students as people. I don't want to be critical about how other people conceptualize things. But for me, I find it very important to remember that students are people. They are people like me, they are just as tired as I am, and they have the same kinds of concerns that I have. I think it is easy for teachers to forget that and treat students like they don't have lives or that they don't have their own particular concerns. Particularly in language learning, that's important. That's where you begin: the idea that students are learning languages for particular reasons or for a particular purpose and so on, and if you can help them develop those reasons and purposes, then that's good teaching. That's teaching for autonomy. That's like the seed growing - so it's not a bad metaphor. I think the idea that learning is growth is a valid idea. Otherwise, you're going to see the learner as an empty vessel, and you've got to try to fill it up. So we are all looking for alternatives to that idea of filling up an empty vessel with knowledge.

Michael: Isn't this idea still prevalent in Asia? The idea that the teacher has to bestow this knowledge upon the learner and then the learner has to absorb it?

Phil: My impression is that it is prevalent in education systems. It's odd, actually, because when you look at policies and curriculum documents and so on, that idea is not there. It's all learner-centered, it's all lifelong learning, it's all communicative and task-based and so on. But it seems that at the level of the way that schools organize things, you tend to get that filling-up-the-vessel idea, and I think it's got a lot to do with the big high-stakes public examinations. I think that once you get that, it encourages a lot of conformity.

Hopefully, in Hong Kong at the school level, it's changing a little bit because they've just introduced a lot of in-class, in-school assessments. But we have a system where you have one examination for the whole territory, for the whole city. In principle, I should be able to go into a school on Tuesday, for example, and see what's happening in that school and I should be able to go anywhere in the city and see exactly the same thing happening. That's the ideal situation, but I think it's impossible and they can't enforce it. It just doesn't work. And that's irrespective of the level of the students. You've got really good students and really weak students, and they're all supposed to be doing the same thing. The driving force of that is the examination. So, I guess within educations systems, you have a lot of different drivers and they conflict sometimes.

But this is the case all over Asia. We have these education policies, particularly at the school level, which are in favor of learner centeredness, communicative teaching, autonomy, etc., but it seems that the school systems themselves and the examinations systems conflict with that – they disconnect.

And this is why you can talk to teachers about autonomy. This is why they want to talk about it. It creates a kind of fertile ground where you can actually have a discussion. But at the end of the day the teachers are quite likely to go away and say "yes, but I can't do anything". So, I feel that it's important that we try to address that problem.

Jackie: How has your thinking towards autonomy evolved?

Phil: Well, I think there's a big autonomy and a smaller autonomy, and the big autonomy is really about education reform, about really changing the whole approach to language learning and language education. And then there's a small autonomy, which is what teachers can practically do without changing the whole system. If you work in teacher education or even when you are speaking at conferences like this, it's not really helpful to tell teachers that the entire education system should change, or even that they should change it. Well, maybe they *can* do that, but they can't do it tomorrow. So, I think that we try to put that idea in their minds that it would be great if the whole education system would change, but there are also things that you can do now that will be good for your students.

Michael: How do you feel about democratic schools such as Sudbury – where they promote a Rousseau-like curriculum, where the learners have more freedom to explore different kinds of stimuli and take up whatever interests them? Also, learners have a stake in deciding the rules in the school; they can propose rules and have the same voting power as school staff. There are several of these schools even in Japan. I'm wondering how successful they are?

Phil: This is a whole informal education system in the States, right? I think every big city, every state has one or two of these schools and some are better known than others. The impression I have of these schools is that they generally serve kids who are dropping out, who are failing in the state system. So in a sense, as a parent, you only send your kind there when they fail everything else. It's really a last resort. If they fail there, it doesn't really matter because they've failed everywhere else. It does seem that they work for many of those kids. You're talking about kids who have taken almost no responsibility for their learning, and are very, very demotivated. These schools can have an effect in motivating or empowering the students.

Michael: Do you have any experience working with these schools?

Phil: No, I don't have any experience, no. To my knowledge, there was a well-known one in England – Summerhill. If you're interested, get the book (http://www.amazon.com/Summerhill-School-New-View-Childhood/dp/0312141378). A.S Neill was the headmaster – he wrote the book on it. It was one of the first of these free schools in the 60s. There were no rules, you didn't have to go to class, you could do anything you wanted. Well, what they claimed was that normally the kids would just sort of lie around

and do nothing for six weeks, and then they would get bored. They started going along to lessons because they were interesting. There have been a number of very well-known graduates. But whether that's a model for an entire education system – I don't know. These schools have a particular role within the mainstream education system in that they are taking up the kids who really can't cope with mainstream education.

Michael: Do you think technology has had an effect on learner autonomy, particularly with increasing use of online and mobile technology? Anyone can access any kind of information in the blink of an eye.

Phil: Yes, I think it's had a massive effect, actually. I think that it is probably the most important thing that is influencing autonomous language learning, especially in countries or in situations where students don't have direct access to the language they're learning. The Internet has really quite radically changed that situation because kids are spending hours every day on it. It's like that's another country that they live in. All the research I've seen which has looked at students, the language, and the Internet is really showing that they do access, particularly in English, the foreign language that they are learning out of class on their own. They don't tell the teachers. It's not part of homework. They just do it. Whether they connect it to what they're learning in school or not, I don't know, but I think often they don't.

Jackie: What about the situation in Hong Kong? Do students access the Internet to learn English?

Phil: The major complaint that I've heard in Hong Kong year after year is the students don't practice English outside class, but actually they do now. We know that they do, especially at the secondary level. They get into things on the computer, and they're doing it all the time, even if only they're playing games. Maybe it's very different in Japan. In Hong Kong, very few people play video games in Chinese. Most people play in English because of the quality of the games. So Japanese games come out in an English version and a Chinese version. But normally the English version is much better than the Chinese version. It's much more sophisticated. It's because the Chinese game is a copy, it's not under license. It's not exactly the same game. Actually, it's not just the language, but the game itself. The English games are always ahead. They may even be a year ahead of the Chinese games. That's why more people play games in English instead of Chinese. But lots of kids are finding ways to use the Internet in a foreign language, so I think that's really going to have a very big impact.

Michael: Do you think technology will have an impact on the role of the teacher in the future? Computer-assisted language learning is still a relatively new field. Do you think it may change our goals?

Phil: If you're teaching English to students in Japan, or you're teaching English to Japanese students who are at a British or American university, the approach would be very different, right? To oversimplify, you've got a foreign language approach and a second language approach. So, what I'm thinking is that in foreign language situations, the Internet is making English more of a second language. So I think it's that kind of adaptation - you have to adapt teaching to account for the fact that students have so many more opportunities to talk to people or do things outside of class. And the idea, for example, that we take all the text into the classroom for the students for reading – we find the text and give it to the students – is so unnecessary now. It is very easy to ask the kids to go out and go find a text for themselves. If they've got mobile phones they can even do it while they're sitting in the classroom.

I think this applies particularly to the self-access context. People involved with self-access are already rethinking this. You don't have to provide all of the resources anymore. It's probably more important to be knowledgeable about the resources that are available on the Internet. Students don't necessarily have to come to your self-access center. To a certain extent, self-access is maybe becoming redundant as well. Self-access centers may become more like social centers for people interested in learning foreign languages.

Jackie: What have been the most crucial moments in developing your own thinking about researching and promoting autonomy?

Phil: Well, I started off in self-access with the idea that autonomy was about self-instruction, about providing people with resources for self-instruction. And I think the major way in which my thinking has

developed is that it shifted from the idea of providing resources in a particular place to looking at types of learners and to what extent they are autonomous inside and outside the classroom. So, that's been the biggest development over 20 years or so. And I think a lot of other people in the field have gone through a similar development as well.

Michael: What advice would you give for teachers seeking to promote learner autonomy in an environment where teacher-centered instruction is still the norm?

Phil: My advice is – and you can quote me on this – do what you can and don't worry that you are not achieving the really big goal. Try to do small things that you *can* do and that won't get you into too much trouble. Like a lot of people, I thought of learner autonomy as a kind of goal, something you're trying to achieve with students. That's fine, but sometimes I just have to prepare my next lesson. When I do that I can just think about 'how am I going to teach this stuff'. But if I add in autonomy, I think 'how am I going to teach this stuff' *and* 'how am I going to introduce some autonomy in the course as well', and I will prepare in a different way. The way I prepare it may not achieve the goal of autonomy in the end, but it will be different – it will take autonomy into account. So going back to advice for teachers, when you're planning lessons, when you're planning a course, just think about where autonomy can fit in. If you think about autonomy, will you do this a little bit differently?

There's an interesting thing that Kumaravadivelu (2003) says - I was actually quite strongly influenced by him and his 'post-method pedagogy'. He has ten principles, ten things you should think about whenever you're planning a curriculum or a course. What struck me is his idea that autonomy is *one* of these principles. So, I'm excessively interested in autonomy, but for everybody else, autonomy is only going to be one of ten things to consider. So, in terms of practically making autonomy work in teaching – just factor autonomy into your planning. There will be a very small number of people who actually plan their courses to achieve autonomy, but for everybody else, what we can hope is that they incorporate it in one way or another.

Jackie: How do you factor autonomy into your courses?

Phil: Mainly by trying to create spaces where the students can have more choices and make more decisions. People expect my classes are really autonomous, but they're not, actually, because of the situation I teach in. For example, in one class I have 160 students in a lecture hall. I'm supposed to give a lecture – that's the way this course is structured. So I do little things in the lecture to try to give them choices, try to get them more engaged, but it's still a lecture; it's still not the best way to teach.

Jackie: How about learners who prefer the teacher to do everything for them and think they're too busy to be autonomous?

Phil: Actually, that's a real problem. My kid goes to an international school where they do a lot of project work. It's progressive in the sense of having the students more actively involved in what they're doing. But the number of things he has to keep in his head and managing the workload is challenging because he's involved in many project groups. You can handle one or two…but what if you have five of those? Five different subjects, five different groups to manage? You've got to plan everything and so on. So I think, in schools that adopt that approach, the problem that they face is the complexity of managing learning. My feeling is that the filling-up-a-vessel approach is very efficient in terms of the amount of knowledge you can pour in, but if you're going to have more of a constructivist approach, I think there's a trade-off: You have to say that they're not going to learn quite as much – their learning may have to be more focused. The benefits that you get in terms of the student's development of learning skills outweighs the number of words they know. It's quality versus quantity.

But this is a very difficult argument because people think it's important that autonomous learners should get to the same level of proficiency as non-autonomous learners. And I think they may not, actually. We may have to accept that and persuade people that there are more important things than level of proficiency – for example, relevance, usefulness of what you learn. When we measure proficiency, we are very often measuring useless, trivial knowledge. There may be other things we have to consider, personal relevance in particular. These things are difficult to weigh and measure.

Michael: So while autonomy may be an ideal, it doesn't always mesh well with current beliefs and goals.

Phil: Well, no, if you're looking at the bigger picture, and you look at education policies, it does mesh well. I think what doesn't mesh well are the education policies and the systems. It's the institutionalization of education that is the problem, which makes it difficult to implement these policies. There seems to be a willingness among people who are at policy decision-making levels, but it's difficult to put it into practice, and it's difficult to get people to practice what they preach.

Jackie: That's something for us all to think about. Do you have any last words to say?

Phil: I think it's what I said before: *Please think about autonomy when you're planning your teaching. Keep it in mind.*

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Note
The photo on this page shows Robert Moreau, Phil Benson and Jackie Suginaga.