

**SHORT ARTICLES | 小論**

## What Qualities Autonomous Teachers Should Nurture to Promote Learner Autonomy

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During my later years in elementary school, I remember my homeroom teacher calling me stupid. I responded to her, smiling at the same time, “Yep. You are right. I am stupid.” However, deep down, now when I think about it, I am not sure whether I really liked it or not. It was years and years ago, but I might have been hurt, and I might have put on a facade of not caring. As my motivation was always low, and I was the kind of student who always got bad grades, most of my teachers continued to look down on me until I was a second grader in junior high school. One day, my social studies teacher said to me, “You really ought to study hard, otherwise you won’t be able to go to high school.” His comments really hit home. I decided to start sitting at my desk to review the pages I had learned within that day. I continued to study like that until I got into university.

By the time I was a university student, I decided to become an English teacher. Because of my past experiences at junior high school, I was determined to become an English teacher who is non-judgemental. That is, I do not want to judge my students based on how they look and talk. If they study hard enough, they can achieve anything. Although I worked for foreign-affiliated and Japanese companies for 10 years before I finally became an English teacher, my thinking about this didn’t change in the slightest and still remains the same today. I learned from my experiences that I will tell my learners if I can do it, they can do it. I would like to interact with my learners with that in my mind and with respect. In a nutshell, if I am not motivated, how can my learners be motivated?

After 10 years of working in business, I started teaching. I then began asking myself questions such as “What does teaching really mean and how should I really teach?” or “Is the way I teach my learners OK? Shortly afterwards I learned that there is a TESOL Master’s program at Kanda University of International Studies, and decided to apply. I started doing my Master’s in 2016, and since then I have felt joy about learning every minute I study, even a sense of accomplishment when I submit my term papers after a course is over. For some reason, I seem to have always known that teachers need to be autonomous at a subconscious level if they expect their students to be autonomous.

After taking a course in Learner Autonomy as part of my MA studies, my belief that teachers need to be autonomous before they can expect their students to be so grew even stronger than

before. To foster students' autonomous language learning, Benson (2011) observed “teachers themselves must display a degree of autonomy in their approaches to teaching and learning” (p. 185). I have also come to question how any learners could develop their own autonomy unless their teachers themselves are autonomous. Little (1995) stated that “...since learning arises from interaction, an interaction is characterized by interdependence, the development of autonomy in learner presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers” (p. 175). Teachers interact with their students in their classroom, and hence, naturally, teachers influence their own students in their learning and teaching. In my case, for example, I use “near-peer role models” (Murphey, 1998) during my class. Although age-wise my learners are much younger than I am, talking to my learners in English as much and successfully as possible “increases my learners' motivation and strategy-choice while challenging limiting beliefs” (Murphey, 1998, p. 201). A few students actually have come to me during breaks asking me how they could improve their English skills, or telling me that they want to be able to speak English like I do. Although the number of students who have talked with me like that is just a handful, there is a possibility that I might actually have had some influence on other students as well. For reasons like this, teachers being autonomous is essentially prerequisite for students to foster their own autonomy. In the second half of this short reflective article, I would like to share my opinions and views regarding what qualities autonomous teachers should nurture in order to promote their students' autonomy.

**Dialogue and inquiry:** Teachers might want to take some time to talk to or ask their students questions regarding lessons activity contents to improve their teaching skills and approaches. When I was a high school student and university student, I often asked my teachers questions. I still ask my students many questions. In this sense, my students are my teachers. I believe autonomous teachers keep asking themselves and their own learners about how they can foster autonomous learning for their own learners.

**Dialogue and reflection:** As a teacher seriously interested in teacher autonomy, I reflect before, during, and after lessons. This is also why I ask my students and myself more questions related to my teaching. In this sense, I'm a learner myself. In addition, I often write a reflective journal in regard to what I teach and how I teach. I can try to improve my own teaching skills as well as what steps I need to take for my learners' language learning related to my teaching.

**Positive attitude:** I believe that autonomous teachers tend to have a positive attitude about students having the capacity to learn autonomously. I started having a positive attitude toward my students' capacity to be able to learn more autonomously in and outside the classroom. By this I mean that teachers should be equipped with their belief in their students' capacity to learn autonomously if we want to promote learners' autonomy.

**Continuous support:** Based on my experience, autonomous teachers are more likely to continue assisting their students until they can reach their goals every step of the way. Language learning is to some extent a time investment and requires an interactive process with others. Hence, teachers' continuous support related to their performance and interaction can lead to their learners becoming autonomous.

**Proactive, continuous development of teacher autonomy:** Teachers need to be open to continuous improvement and development of their skills and knowledge. “This is a sign of teacher autonomy and itself further develops teacher autonomy” (Gruendel, 2018, p. 144). As Little (1995) puts it, “...language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous” (p. 180). In my own case, for example, I started educating myself more by attending lectures, and taking classes at my graduate school related to teaching. By doing so, I learnt new ideas about teaching and have applied some of these to my own teaching context and put them into practice.

**Awareness raising:** Autonomous teachers can raise students’ awareness to be more responsible for what they study and how they study because they were once learners who raised consciousness of their own language learning. According to Kohonen (1992), “Raising the awareness of one’s own learning and gaining an understanding of the process involved is thus an important key to the development of autonomous learning” (as cited in Benson, 2011, p. 107). By becoming more aware of their language learning, learners will learn to realize how important it is to study their target language with their own clear and specific purposes.

**Motivation:** According to Dörnyei (2001), motivation is one of the key factors in learning a language. As Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) put it, it is motivation that precedes autonomy. Without motivation, autonomy does not arise in students’ language learning. Teachers play a significant role in fostering and encouraging students’ motivation. If teachers are not motivated, how would they know how to motivate their own students? Autonomous teachers can profoundly understand the value of motivation and how they can utilize it to encourage their learners to be autonomous in their learning and teaching. With this value, autonomous teachers can direct their learners into the right path for them to acquire their second language and take greater control of their learning.

**Encouraging learner control:** If students are given opportunities to take control of their own learning (Benson, 2011) and their learning is positive with teachers’ sufficient support, students can assume their control of their own learning, and hence, take more responsibility for their own learning. For instance, teachers can encourage peer-teaching and decision-making in their lesson contents. Furthermore, having students choose their own homework, for example, from available resources can enhance their decision-making for homework assignments tasks. This way, students can feel like they have more control over their learning and take more responsibility for what they do and how they study.

Up until now, there has been some research done regarding this field (e.g., Smith & Erdoğan, 2008; Mello, Dutra, & Jorge, 2008; Tehrani & Mansor, 2012). The eight elements that I have proposed autonomous teachers should attend to in order to foster learner autonomy are based on my subjective experiences and reflection in a second language teaching and learning classroom. There are perhaps more elements to be nurtured to become an autonomous teacher. For example, Little (1995) viewed an autonomous teacher as “... 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” (p. 179). Benson (2011) moreover mentions that the idea of teacher autonomy can be viewed as “...a professional capacity connected, on one hand, to the ability to control the processes involved in teaching and, on the other, to the ability to control one’s own development as a teacher” (p. 189). However, there are also institutional settings to consider. Benson (2011) adds that learner autonomy arises and progresses in school settings mainly through the transfer of control from teachers to students, many teachers work in conditions where the control they exert is normally constrained by school rules and conventions. We also need to think about other constraining factors such as stakeholders including parents, other teachers, and administrators. Benson goes on to say teachers’ willingness to go against the conventional wisdom of educational systems and make efforts to create spaces within their working environments for students to take more control over their learning is an important aspect of teacher autonomy.

I myself am still searching for more ways to show my autonomous aspects to my learners at school. As Barfield et al. (2002) argue in the Shizuoka definition of teacher autonomy, the autonomous teacher is one who can understand different constraints on teaching and learning at their own institution. In addition, they are willing to “confront institutional barriers in socially appropriate ways” and to change those constraints into affordances. I would like to keep searching for better ways to be an autonomous teacher, while, at the same time, as Barfield et al. (2002) put it, taking responsibility for my teaching and learning by first confronting whatever difficulty might arise, secondly reflecting on my teacher role and teaching process and who can change it in a socially acceptable manner, and finally committing myself to promoting learner autonomy as my lifelong learning engagement at school into the foreseeable future.

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