

"How can you prepare teachers to encourage learner independence?"

Reflections on personal experience as a teacher of English and as a pre-service teacher trainer

**Isabel Marques
Instituto de Education and Psychology
University of Minho.
Braga - Portugal**

When trying to find an answer to the above question, in the context of the IATEFL (1997) LI SIG Pre-Conference Symposium, the following ideas came to my mind as the most striking aspects of my own preparation for a pedagogy for autonomy:

1. It is not a straightforward process.

The year of 1993 was a landmark in my career. At a time of educational reform in Portugal secondary school teachers such as myself started feeling the need for teacher development programmes, so as to be able to cope with the demands of the new syllabuses and their underlying educational philosophy. Initiatives from the Ministry of Education were practically non-existent and so the in-service teacher training project "Pedagogy for Autonomy - Teacher Development and Pedagogical Experimentation" offered to teachers of English by the University of Minho, under the supervision of Flávia Vieira and Maria Alfredo Moreira could not have been more opportune.

After the first thirty hours, in which theoretical input was well combined with systematic reflection on personal pedagogical beliefs and practices, my natural sense of professional disquiet increased. I realised that I had already reached a certain compromise between the assumptions of the communicative approach and those of learner-based teaching but, however open to pedagogical innovation I considered myself, I still felt that I needed to take a further step forward if I wanted to implement a pedagogy for autonomy – I would have to pay extra attention to the development of my pupils' learning competence.

In spite of my readiness to accept change, it took me some time to "digest" some of the new concepts, and a kind of psychological preparation to be able to manage emotional states that ranged from idealistic enthusiasm to change the (language teaching/learning) world, to frustration caused by the obstacles the established state of affairs insisted on placing in my way.

2. Teachers need stimulus and encouragement to attempt a pedagogy for autonomy.

In my case stimulus came immediately after I presented my critical report on the first stage of the course. I was encouraged to put into practice my intention of establishing a relationship between a pedagogy for autonomy and learner motivation. In September 1993 a new school year began and I soon realised that generalised demotivation was the main problem in one of my classes – I thus had the most favourable context for my project and I accepted the challenge. Thanks to the support I got from my University colleagues I never lost my sense of professional security because besides all the practical orientations they provided, they helped me overcome my anxieties and reassured me about the relevance of my work.

From September 1994 to July 1996 I was engaged in the second and third stages of the "Pedagogy for Autonomy" teacher training project, but having meanwhile become a University teacher trainer, I found myself playing two different roles at the same time – in-service teacher trainee and pre-service teacher trainer. This peculiar situation created the ideal conditions for my further pedagogical experimentation, this time involving my own attempts to prepare a group of student-teachers for the adoption of a pedagogy for autonomy.

My previous attempt to try out the principles of this approach as a "normal" teacher, as someone who knows the school reality, empowered me to make it one of my training objectives and the fact that I was engaged in a teacher development project myself helped me understand my trainees' problems and doubts, as they were, or had been, my own. Besides, the interdependence between my project and their work as trainees gave us a certain sense of mutual commitment, which resulted in a very positive relationship between me and them. We worked as a team with common goals -- teacher development and learner autonomy.

3. Teachers must realise by themselves that they can do what at first seemed impossible.

It is one thing to read about new pedagogical trends and get acquainted with other people's experiences, imagining how interesting they might be, but it is quite another to try innovation yourself. When trying to develop my pupils' learning competence, I was faced with one of my biggest difficulties -- to attend to the different learning needs and expectations of 28 pupils. First of all I would have to help them identify their own needs and then make them more actively involved in the learning process.

This was not an easy task, as they tended to resist giving up their "comfortable" position as knowledge recipients (or mere passive spectators). But after some initial effort I started getting precious feedback from the learners -- a fairly good number of them kept learning diaries, and answering questionnaires in which they expressed their opinion about different aspects of the teaching/learning process gradually came to be regarded as a natural classroom activity. Taking all kinds of feedback into account, implementing different forms of collaborative work in the classroom and giving pupils the chance to choose activities according to their learning priorities, as well as letting them select or produce materials for the classroom, I was trying to cater for my pupils' individual needs. I proved to myself that a learner-centred approach, which I had only thought feasible with small groups of learners, was also possible with large classes.

4. Teachers should be able to work on a collaborative basis.

Apart from counting on the collaboration from the University I was lucky to have a school colleague who shared the same sort of problem as I did. Having attended the "Pedagogy for Autonomy" course together, we decided to develop the same kind of project in both classes. Our reality was not at all encouraging, but the fact that we could share doubts, practical ideas and results helped us keep our sense of direction, in spite of the more or less explicit disdain on the part of other colleagues who would rather not be disturbed by the "winds of change".

As the other two projects I developed in the context of that course involved doing action-research with student-teachers working in groups, collaboration, now extended to a larger number of participants, was necessarily at the basis of our development process.

5. Teachers must be autonomous themselves to be able to develop their learners' autonomy.

Taking Holec's definition of autonomy - "the ability to manage one's own learning" - as a reference, I believe that the development of this ability in the school context greatly depends on teachers' ability to decide what is best for their learners' effective learning, i. e. on their ability to manage their own action according to learners' needs and existing contextual constraints. A reflective approach to teaching combined with a solid pedagogical preparation are essential prerequisites for achieving this professional autonomy. The adoption of action-research in the experimental stage of the teacher training course was of crucial importance for me to achieve this goal. Since it had proved effective with me as a trainee, I used it as my training strategy with the student-teachers I was supervising, and their evaluations of the training process encouraged me to go on.

Although I am realistically aware that it takes time and effort for teachers to be prepared to encourage learner autonomy, I believe that if they are intrinsically motivated and have the chance to develop their own pedagogical knowledge and professional autonomy, it is possible for them to overcome the discouraging effect of the constraints they will find in the school context.

My experience tells me that action-research, which involves working in collaboration with other colleagues and on a "see-for-yourself" basis, is a very suitable strategy in teacher education, both for experienced teachers and pre-service teacher trainees.