Where there's a will there's a way... to teacher and learner autonomy: landmarks of a teaching career

Isabel Barbosa

Escola Secundária Sá de Miranda

Braga, Portugal

Abstract

Although ten years ago most writings on learner autonomy still did not explicitly relate it to teacher development prerequisites, my experience in the past seventeen years tells me that the development of learner and teacher autonomy are intimately interconnected. The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of teacher development within a framework in which reflective practice is articulated with an intentional focus on learner autonomy. It is structured in three sections, each one of them corresponding to what I call "landmarks" in my career as a Foreign Language teacher, from the first hesitant steps as an in-service teacher trainee to a more confident professional engagement in the promotion of innovation in school practices.

First contact with the concept of learner autonomy – envisioning new horizons

After almost twenty years of teaching practice as a secondary school teacher of English and German, I had the fortunate opportunity to attend the course "Pedagogy for autonomy – teacher development and pedagogical experimentation" (Vieira, 2000; Vieira & Moreira, 1996), which took place at the University of Minho from 1993 to 1996. What I learnt during the first thirty-hour course, in May 1993, was the beginning of what turned out to be one of the most significant changes in my (professional) life. But significant change is never a simple process, as it entails questioning personal beliefs and practices. The course helped me realise that although I had already reached a certain compromise between the assumptions of the communicative approach and those of learner-based teaching, I still needed to take a further step forward if I wanted to implement 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 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 I had to face. At this stage, I knew that I would never be able to implement pedagogy for autonomy as defined by Henri Holec (Holec, 1981), but I was determined to experiment some aspects of the new approach with my students. In spite of all my doubts, the course helped me reach a new level of inquiry, which made me feel more confident to introduce change into my practice. After I presented my critical report on the theoretical part of the course, I was encouraged to put into practice my intention to establish a relationship between pedagogy for autonomy and learner motivation, which became the objective of my first action-research project. Adopting a reflective/investigative approach to teaching was an exciting experience, not only because it was new to me but mainly because it helped me manage some conceptual conflicts derived from my recently enlarged pedagogical horizons and the contextual constraints I had to deal with. Besides, I had no doubt that while I helped my students think about strategies that might enable them to regard the learning process as something they could control, I also learned to look at the teaching/learning process as something that I could manage not only based on my representations of good teaching practices but mainly on the learners' needs, preferences and cooperation.

It was particularly gratifying to find out that I could actually do what at first seemed impossible. Even though promoting students' active involvement in the learning process was not an easy task, as they tended to resist giving up their "comfortable" position as knowledge recipients (or mere passive spectators), after some initial effort, I started getting precious feedback from them. 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.

This experience, followed by Flávia's invitation to join her team of Methodology teachers and teacher educators was the beginning of a long and rewarding pedagogical journey (Barbosa, 2008).

Leaving the security of "home" – the thrill of pedagogical explorations

Being invited to work with Flávia and her team was a big honour and an enormous challenge, as it meant leaving my comfortable position as a FL teacher. Working in higher education was something that I had never included in my career plans, but my desire to go beyond the limits of the familiar helped me overcome the fear of the unknown, and I'm glad I left the security of "home" because with my new colleagues I discovered that I could go further as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher.

From September 1994 to July 1996 I was engaged in the second and third stages of the "Pedagogy for Autonomy" teacher training project, and 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 – which created the ideal conditions for my further pedagogical experimentation (Marques, 2000). As a member of the team until 2007, I had invaluable opportunities to foster my own professional development and innovative ability while trying to prepare my students/student teachers for the adoption of pedagogy for autonomy.

I had the privilege to participate in a supervision project started in 1995, which consisted in using action research as a means to promote reflective teaching towards pedagogy for autonomy (Moreira, et al., 1999; Vieira, 1999; Vieira, et al., 2008). Articulating ideas from Flávia's and Maria Alfredo's research, the work done within this supervision project has been greatly inspired by the assumption that inquiry is at the heart of pedagogy and professional development (Vieira & Moreira, 2008).

But innovation was not exclusive of this supervision project, within which I developed my MA project (Barbosa, 2003). In my role of FL Methodology teacher I also experienced the thrill of exploring new pedagogical approaches that challenged conservative academic practices, bringing about facilitating conditions for students to develop their own self-direction and an inquiry-oriented approach to learning how to teach. Besides being part of the above mentioned supervision project, I was involved, in collaboration with my colleagues Madalena Paiva and Isabel Sandra Fernandes, in a multidisciplinary, multi-case research project whose global aim was *"to transform (understand-renew-enhance) the role of pedagogy at university"* (Vieira, 2003: 3), by implementing what Shulman (2000: 50) defines as a scholarship of teaching and learning:

"We develop a scholarship of teaching when our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued, and exchanged with other members of the communities so they, in turn, can build on our work. These are the qualities of all scholarship".

This project, within which I developed my PhD research, rested on a concept of pedagogic quality whose operationalisation depends on the following set of principles - Intention, Transparency, Coherence, Relevance, Democratisation, Reflectivity, Self-direction, and Creativity/Innovation - and involves the conduction of case studies, peer observation, and journal writing.

As members of this team, we developed our own case study (Barbosa, 2006; Barbosa et al., 2008) in the context of the English-German Teaching Methodology course, trying to enhance our students' professional learning by focussing primarily on the principles of Reflectivity, Self-direction, and Creativity/Innovation, as defined below (Vieira, 2003: 5-6):

Reflectivity – Pedagogical action promotes critical thinking, by integrating a critical reflective approach towards its assumptions and aims, contents and methodology, assessment, learning processes, the role of the various disciplines of the curriculum and the relation between the curriculum and the professional world.

Self-direction – Pedagogical action promotes the development of self-management attitudes and skills: self-directed working plans, self-evaluation, independent study skills, intellectual curiosity, willingness to learn, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Creativity/Innovation – Pedagogical action stimulates processes of understanding and intervention with social and professional implications; it promotes personal interpretation and multi/inter/transdisciplinary views of knowledge and reality, as well as research and problem solving abilities, abilities to develop personal projects and to intervene in professional contexts, and also openness towards innovation.

Our case study was carried out in 2004/05, and I gave continuity to the new approach until I returned to my former working environment in September 2007.

After a most enriching period of thirteen years exploring new professional possibilities, I didn't feel my coming back to Sá de Miranda Secondary School as a breakup with the University of Minho, my second professional home. This sense of belonging is reinforced by the fact that I am still linked to it as a member of GT-PA (Grupo de Trabalho-Pedagogia para a Autonomia), a learning community created in 1997 as a "small network aiming at the collaborative development of its members by exploring the idea(l) of a pedagogy for autonomy within the school context." (Vieira, 2002: 2). This experience inspired me to set up the collaborative project that I am going to present in the next section.

Coming back "home" – the joy of finding companions for further journeys

Although, as a supervisor of student teachers in training, I hadn't lost contact with the school reality, I was aware of the new challenges of this change in my professional life (Barbosa, 2008). It was the same school, but School had changed since 1994. And so had I. I had become a new person and a new professional, and my previous experience in the field of pedagogy for autonomy made me feel the need to go on with the work I had been involved in at the university. I was also much more aware of the never-ending reasons to keep embarking on new pedagogical journeys, preferably not alone, as I had also experienced the true value of professional collaboration and knew that my individual action would bring about very limited results. So, before I had time to "unpack" from my pedagogical explorations as a teacher educator, I started trying to find companions for what I hope will be a long rewarding journey towards teacher and learner autonomy – a project initiated in 2007/08 with a group of colleagues from different disciplinary areas, whose main aim is to foster learner autonomy as one means to achieve educational success.

But what does this entail? If learners are supposed to develop their autonomy, they should be engaged in activities that promote *reflection* upon the different dimensions of the teaching/learning process (objectives, contents, strategies, pedagogical roles, classroom communication, evaluation, etc.), *experimentation of* learning strategies (not only cognitive but also metacognitive and socio-affective), *pedagogical negotiation* (of meanings and decisions), and *regulation* (i.e., planning, monitoring and evaluation) of

learning experiences. Learners must become aware that they are responsible for their learning, and teachers must be prepared to accept that they can no longer control all aspects of classroom life. *Learning* rather than teaching must become the main focus of attention, and when this happens teachers will realise that, instead of a homogeneous group to whom they offer the same "dish", each class is composed by a number of individuals with different interests, needs, expectations and competence levels.

Despite all kinds of personal and contextual constraints to the implementation of pedagogy for autonomy, these will not be strong enough to discourage teachers in their pursuit if they are willing and have the opportunity to develop their own pedagogical knowledge and professional autonomy. So, I felt that with a project aiming at the promotion of educational success through pedagogy for autonomy I might contribute with something innovative and stimulating for students and teachers alike.

The project, entitled "Pedagogy for autonomy and educational success – what relation?", and whose objectives are 1) to promote the integrated development of competences, 2) to promote practice coherence, with reference to curriculum objectives[1], and 3) to promote professional dialogue, was approved by the School Pedagogical Board[2] in October 2007 becoming part of the School Annual Plan of Activities.

All 10th year teachers were informed about the initiative in the end-of-term evaluation meetings in December, but some teachers of other levels got interested and joined in. In January 2008 we started working as a multidisciplinary group of 20 teachers (including 11th and 12th year levels) interested in experimenting what for most of them was a new pedagogical approach.

Our first meetings were dedicated to the discussion of the concept of autonomy and some forms of implementing it. I shared some of the materials I had designed for my classes, and some of these were analysed according to parameters of pedagogy for autonomy (Vieira, 2001: 97-100) (Appendix 1). Some colleagues adopted or adapted some of the examples provided, while others designed their own materials, according to their priorities.

We met as regularly as we could, and took all the opportunities to disseminate our work (Barbosa, 2009; Barbosa & Cerqueira, 2008, Barbosa et al., 2009). At the end of the school year, the project was very positively evaluated by the team members, and all

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[1] The notion of learner autonomy appears in national syllabi across the school curriculum, although in diverse ways and with diverse foci (see Silva et al., 2009)
[2] This Board is formed by the School Director and all Department Coordinators, who approve the Annual Plan of Activities, in accordance with the School Educational Project.

the respondents to the evaluation questionnaire stated their willingness to continue this work, despite the difficulties they had experienced and the modest results achieved.

To divulge our work in our school, in October 2008 we organised a seminar in which Flávia kindly accepted to make a short presentation on the theme of our project. Students also had a voice in the meeting, confirming our belief that a learner/learning-centred approach is a valuable means to foster their success as learners, mainly if teachers work in a concerted way.

Conscious of the importance of concerted action to bring about sustained pedagogical change, we have so far developed some common activities, and tried to engage more teachers in each class, but this hasn't been an easy task. We planned a second open seminar for the beginning of the present school year, believing it might be an appropriate occasion to give all the school teachers an account of the work done and present data from the project evaluation, this time including the students' opinions (Appendix 2). However, due to organisational difficulties of different kinds, in part related to a thorough rebuilding process our school is undergoing, the seminar had to be postponed to January 2010.

As there had been a considerable renewal of the teaching staff, we were counting on a large audience, and were very optimistic about the possibility of attracting new members to the team. But it turned out that there were other meetings at the same time, and many colleagues, who had shown interest in the seminar were prevented from attending it. Nevertheless, we gained two new members, one of whom is Madalena Torres, a young Biology teacher who, despite having a temporary position in our school, is quite committed to the team's cause.

As collaboration is one of the stepping stones of this project, I asked my colleagues to contribute to this article with their own pictures of the journey. Three of them responded to my appeal, sharing with us their own views of the project as they experienced it. One of them was Madalena, who highlights its formative value:

> "The project Pedagogy for Autonomy gave me the opportunity to frame and, to a certain extent, justify strategies that I had been idealizing and implementing in my teaching practice. This has been an excellent opportunity for personal growth, and a valuable contribution to help grow the students I work with. I think that pedagogy for autonomy is an intelligent approach, fundamental in our society. During my short experience/participation in this project I implemented some tools designed within the working group, where I found space to learn, to share experiences and realities with a very clear objective. Promoting pedagogy for autonomy is in itself a challenge". (Translated)

Helena Matos, one of the English teachers who has been with us since the creation of the group emphasizes the collaborative dimension of our work as a learning community, as well as the pedagogical value of the pedagogical strategies we have been implementing:

> "Over the last three years (2007-2010), a group of teachers from different subject areas, have been exchanging points of view, meeting together, discussing several topics related to autonomy, sharing materials, exposing their ideas and doubts… in a very healthy and welcoming atmosphere. We have learned a lot with each other and this type of collaborative and shared work can expand our own knowledge and broaden our horizons in terms of teaching. There is always someone in the group who has decided to implement a new strategy, and gives us feedback from the experience. We are always free to do the same or improve and adapt the strategy used to work with our students too. There is a very open and liberal relationship amongst us and we are completely at ease to talk about anything that worries us or makes us feel rewarded for being teachers.
>
> In our classes (10th and 11th forms), we try to implement some strategies that can make our students more responsible for their own learning process, more autonomous, with a better attitude towards education, by making them think about their own learning strategies, the way they develop their abilities, and by involving them in self-evaluation practices. We believe that at least some of them will learn the lesson and will be successful adult citizens in a near future."

Olímpia Oliveira, a Physical Education and teacher trainer, also contributed with a text in which she focuses on the work she has been doing in the context of initial teacher education. As her classes are taught by three student teachers, she decided to apply some of the principles of pedagogy for autonomy to her work with them. Considering that the teaching practicum is a time for the development of professional autonomy, she presents some of her objectives as a teacher trainer, as well as some of the difficulties she has encountered:

"Being able to analyze teaching contents and select the strategies that best suit each learning situation requires self-confidence and the capacity to reflect upon what was done and what could have worked better if other options had been made. The work I have been doing with the student teachers aims at enabling them to plan and teach lessons, justifying their choices on the grounds of acquired knowledge about the teaching/learning process.

What I have noticed in the last few years is that it is more and more difficult for them to acquire these competences. All the academic knowledge is 'stored in files' and seems to be useless and disconnected from the teaching practice, and as they show no initiative to sort out what is relevant for their daily practice, this is something I have to help them to do. But it is a difficult task to develop their sense of

pleasure for being able to do such things on their own, for being responsible for their choices, assertive in their answers, confident of the results, able to choose methodologies that enhance learner success.

This makes me think that the attitude of some of these student teachers towards school and their teaching role is a reflection of their own experience as learners, who went to school just because they had to, missing the opportunity to develop their competences.

I have promoted reflection upon teaching/learning tasks, and how to make the most of routines. The development of their autonomy also has included reflecting on *where am I and where do I want to go to?* because being aware of the way you still have to go helps you to choose how to do it. So, every week they keep a record of what has and hasn't been accomplished, what was most and least enjoyable, easy or difficult, useful or useless. Special attention has also been paid to the development of self-confidence and self-esteem as an important basis for autonomy". (Translated)

Olímpia's experience is parallel to what is done in the classroom context, and attitudinal constraints aren't much different. Even though 168 out of 340 enquired students state that they would like to go on with the type of work done within the project (see Appendix 2), many of them still show some resistance to an approach that requires a more active involvement on their part. On the other hand, a great number of students who arrive at our school to attend the 10th year reveal such a low level of preparation that makes it even more urgent to do something to help them develop their learning competence.

Hoping to be strong enough to go on facing problems as challenges rather than obstacles to promote educational success, I believe that despite the difficulties, our project is just the beginning of what may become an important change in our professional life, and in the academic life of our students. In the latest preliminary evaluation report I was asked to present to the Project Coordination Board I wrote:

"Despite the above mentioned constraints, the project has enabled professional dialogue among a reasonable number of teachers, as well as students' involvement in pedagogical experiences that may enhance their educational success. I hope that lack of participation continuity doesn't have a demobilizing effect within the group, as the evaluation results of the first two years of implementation reveal that this project may have a very positive impact on the learning quality of our students."

I also hope that the sense of community reinforces our determination to pursue the utopias of those who believe that "Pedagogical hope and professional autonomy go hand in hand in our struggle for a better education: education that is empowering for teachers and learners and ultimately contributes to the transformation of society at large". (Jiménez Raya et al., 2007: 55)

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APPENDIX 1

PLANNING AND EVALUATING A LEARNER DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The following questions aim at helping teachers plan and/ or evaluate a Learner Development Activity (LDA), i.e. any activity that seeks to develop learning competence (willingness and ability to learn = readiness to manage learning). Sections A-C refer to general characteristics of the LDA; Section D focusses on the learners' roles in accomplishing it; Section E is a self-regulation checklist for the teacher who seeks to develop a pedagogy for autonomy.

TRANSPARENCY/EXPLICITNESS

➢	WHAT	What aspects of the learning competence are involved in the LDA?
➢	WHAT FOR	What are the LDA aims/ purposes?
➢	WHY	What is the rationale of the LDA?
➢	HOW	What tasks increase the learners' willingness and ability to learn?

➢ How explicit are the answers to the above questions in the learning material? Are there strategies to compensate for lack of explicitness?

B. INTEGRATION

➢ Is the development of learning competence articulated with the development of communicative competence, i.e. does the LDA comprise both learner training and language training as integrated purposes?

➢ In case the LDA solely focusses on the learning competence, what strategies are used to increase the learners' perception of the relevance of the activity in terms of language improvement?

C. APPROPRIATENESS TO CONTEXT/ MEANINGFULNESS

Does the LDA…
- require a diagnosis of the learners' readiness to accomplish it?
    - Does it respond to the learners' characteristics, interests and needs?
    - Does it build on the learners' previous knowledge and experience?
- ➢ provide authentic and useful learning experiences?
- ➢ involve competences that can be transferred to other learning situations?
- ➢ promote progress in the learners' learning competence?

D. LEARNER ROLES TOWARDS SELF-DIRECTION

LDAs may involve learners in a variety of roles. Each LDA should have a particular focus. The questions below may help you to determine it.

REFLECTION
- ➢ **Does the LDA allow the learners *to develop language awareness*?**
- ❑ Formal properties of language
- ❑ Pragmatic properties of language
- ❑ Sociocultural aspects
- ➢ **Does the LDA allow the learners *to develop learning awareness*?**
- ❑ Sense of agency (self-control, self-esteem, self-confidence)
- ❑ Attitudes, representations, beliefs
- ❑ Preferences and styles
- ❑ Aims and priorities
- ❑ Strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, strategic, socio-affective)
- ❑ Tasks (focus, purpose, rationale, demands)
- ❑ Instructional/ didactic process (objectives, activities, materials, evaluation, roles,…)

EXPERIMENTATION
- ➢ **Does the LDA allow the learners *to experience learning strategies*?**
- Discover and try out learning strategies in class
- Use learning strategies outside class
- Explore (pedagogical/ non-pedagogical) resource materials

REGULATION
- ➢ **Does the LDA allow the learners *to regulate learning experiences*?**
- ❑ Monitor/ evaluate attitudes, representations, beliefs
- ❑ Monitor/ evaluate strategic knowledge and ability
- ❑ Assess learning outcomes and progress
- ❑ Identify learning problems or needs
- ❑ Set learning goals
- ❑ Plan their learning
- ❑ Evaluate the instructional/ didactic process

NEGOTIATION
- ➢ **Does the LDA allow the learners *to co-construct learning experiences*?**

- ❑ Work in collaboration with peers
- ❑ Work in collaboration with the teacher
- ❑ Take the initiative, choose and decide

E. TEACHER ROLES TOWARDS LEARNER SELF-DIRECTION

The following questions may help teachers become more aware of their readiness and roles in developing a pedagogy for autonomy. Although the ideal answer to the questions is YES, no teacher is an ideal teacher. In this sense, the checklist should be understood as a self-development instrument rather than an assessment tool. You may select or add questions which are more appropriate/ relevant in your own professional situation.

AM I WILLING TO… ?   AM I ABLE TO…?

- ❑ Understand what is involved in language education and its role in school curricula

- ❑ Understand the theory and practice of a pedagogy for autonomy (assumptions and principles; methodological approaches; research studies)

- ❑ See teaching as an inquiry-oriented, exploratory profession as situations are often unique, uncertain and problematic

- ❑ Challenge routines, conventions and traditions (be subversive if necessary)

- ❑ Share my personal theories and practices with peers

- ❑ Encourage the learners to be critical towards social and educational values and practices, and involve them in finding common solutions which seem appropriate (though not necessarily ideal)

- ❑ Share responsibilities and decisions with the learners

- ❑ Share my pedagogical beliefs with the learners

- ❑ Accept the fact that the learners may not share my own expectations, opinions or beliefs, and that it is not always easy or even desirable to reach a single conclusion or point of view

- ❑ Articulate the personal dimensions of learning (individual expectations, needs and interests) with the social/ interactive nature of the classroom culture

- ❑ Foster interaction where everyone has the right to speak and to contribute towards the co-construction of meanings

- ❑ Collect learner data so as to understand learning processes and their evolution (eg. through observation, questionnaires, diaries, interviews, checklists, etc.)
- ❑ Analyse learner data to find relevant cues to improve teaching and learning

- ❑ Find ways to take learning competence into account when assessing the learners (eg. through self-assessment)

APPENDIX 2

Synthesis of students' answers to questionnaire (340 respondents)

QUESTION A: GLOBAL IMPACT OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	NO ANSWER	Think about what was done and choose the option that best corresponds to your experience
242	30	66	2	1. I participated in the activities with interest and commitment.
201	57	79	3	2. I enjoyed the strategies adopted by the teacher.
263	23	53	1	3. I felt that the teacher tried to help me to learn better.
242	20	77	1	4. I learned to reflect upon my own learning.
172	42	125	1	5. I learned to identify my difficulties and to talk about them.
231	25	82	2	6. I solved some of my difficulties.
241	19	77	3	7. I learned to be more responsible for my own learning.
206	27	106	1	8. I felt that the activities helped me to be a better learner
156	65	117	2	9. What I learned was useful in other school subjects.
220	28	91	1	10. What I learned will be useful in the future.

QUESTION B: DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	NO ANSWER	Think about what was done and say which of these difficulties you felt
33	161	145	1	1. Lack of interest of activities.
46	184	110		2. Waste of time spent on activities I didn't consider useful.
67	125	147	1	3. Difficulty to understand activity objectives.
30	185	124	1	4. Difficulty to reflect upon my learning.
63	150	126	1	5. Difficulty to participate actively.
45	189	105	1	6. Low level of subject matter knowledge.
62	158	119	1	7. Lack of time to do/prepare the activities.

QUESTION C: WORK CONTINUITY

- *Would you like to continue with this type of work in case you stay in this school?*
- **YES – 168**
- **NO – 58**
- **MAYBE – 90**
- **DIDN'T ANSWER – 24**

  REASONS TO CONTINUE
- **It helps to understand the subject matter.**
- **It helps to improve attitudes in the classroom.**
- **It helps to reflect upon learning.**
- **It promotes self-knowledge.**
- **It increases motivation.**
- **It makes classes more dynamic.**
- **It fosters autonomy and responsibility.**
- **It allows mutual help and dialogue (among students).**
- **It's a different but more interesting way to learn. It helps overcome difficulties.**
- **It's useful.**
- **It favours class participation.**
- **It promotes learning.**
- **It helps to get better results.**
- **It favours the teacher's self-evaluation.**