Citation

Autonomy Enhancing Tools for Teacher Development

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Introduction

Recently within the domains of autonomy and language learning, there has been a shift in focus from the learner to the teacher (Lamb, 2008) due to a strengthening view that "an essential precondition for the teacher to be able to foster autonomous learning [through] explicit awareness of the teacher's own self as a learner" (Breen & Mann, 1997, p. 145). The notion of teacher autonomy has evolved from a plethora of perspectives on the promotion of learner autonomy. Attempts at defining both teacher and learner autonomy have been problematic, as both have received political, social, cultural and psychological viewpoints within the literature. In the broadest terms, autonomy has been viewed as the capacity to "take control or take responsibility over one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). This paper does not attempt to provide a new definition of teacher autonomy but discuss various dimensions of autonomy in relation to teacher development on a professional and personal level, which is ultimately for the learners' benefit.

Interest has been growing in the literature on teacher autonomy for promotion of both "teacher training" and "teacher development" (Smith, 2000, 2003; Vieira, 2000; Vieira, Barbosa, Paiva, Fernandes, 2008). There are various distinctions in the literature between: teacher-trainees, student teachers, and pre-service teachers. This paper views these distinctions in the general sense as meaning teachers who have teaching skills at entry level, and will therefore be referred to as "student teachers" throughout the paper.

The teacher, in teacher development is perceived as someone who is involved in long-term teacher development (Richards, 2008). Teacher development and professional development and continuing professional development (CDP) are also terms extensively used within this paper, and will be used interchangeably.

It has been acknowledged that conscious and active pursuit of professional teacher training and development shows characteristics of one developing autonomously as an individual, and has been widely encouraged (Johnson, 2006; Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, 2001). Some of the many ways language teachers can develop in a professional sense include engaging or participating in a MATESOL degree, active-study groups, online resources for example wiki's, blogs, websites, and so forth, materials development, self and peer observations, various types of research and reflective practices such as journal writing or dialogical meetings with peers. There is a substantial body of research on teacher development practices which has sought to identify *reflective Practice* (Farrell, 2007; Schön, 1983, 1987; Wallace, 1991), *action research* (van Lier, 1988) and *exploratory practice* (Allwright, 2003; Tardy and Synder, 2004), and it is thought that teacher education appears to be most affected when integrated with these approaches (Benson, 2010).

A number of studies have demonstrated that engagement in and reflection on autonomy can be an empowering experience for developing autonomy in the teacher as a learner (Barkhuizen,1995; Hacker & Barkhuizen, 2008; Vieria, 2000, Vieira et al., 2008). Furthermore, Smith (2003) states that "actual engagement in and reflection on pedagogy for autonomy, appear to be a particularly powerful means for developing teacher(-learner) autonomy" (p.6), especially when combined with action research and backed with a support network. Allwright (2005) asserts that interrelationships of reflective practice, action research and exploratory practice can be used as models for teacher development. The focus of this paper aims to address these approaches respectively as teacher developmental processes, and to understand their implications for enhancing teacher autonomy.

Learner and Teacher Autonomy

Learner Autonomy

The theoretical framework of learner autonomy is said to be "beset by conflicting ideologies, rolling inconsistencies, and fragmentary theories (Oxford, 2003, p.75). The term *learner autonomy* first originated from Holec (1981), who affirms that the basic methodology for learner training should be one of discovery (p.45). Holec (1981) and Dam (1990) attribute an autonomous learner as one who is capable to control of one's learning in terms of their willingness to do so, as well as having the capacity to set goals which can later be critically assessed.

Little (1991), asserts that learners involved in the learning process are encouraged to take a proactive approach in empowering themselves, and to acquire greater responsibility for their own learning while having "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (p. 4). Although this is a comprehensive definition, it does not take into account that the learning process is very much a social skill, which requires us to communicate on so many different levels and in different contexts. A sociocultural perspective regards learner autonomy as being socially shaped (Oxford, 2003; van Lier, 1996,) and in particular relates to the processes of engagement, negotiation, motivation and knowledge retention (Dam, 1990; Little, 1991).

Dickinson (1987) argues that the self-directed learner does not require a teacher or an institution, rather they are ultimately responsible for all learning-based decisions, including preparation of materials. This should not mean that the learner is working independently without a teacher or other learners as even the most motivated, self-determined and self-directed students would still benefit from guidance from a teacher or peer, albeit on their own terms. Having an interdependent relationship with a teacher or other students is an opportunity through which learners' can test their language learning hypothesis. Learners in general rely on other people for almost everything either directly or indirectly and thus, "our autonomous behavior is always conditioned and constrained by our inescapable interdependence (Little, 1998). Lamb (2008) asserts that "whether working independently of the teacher or not, learners need to develop autonomy in this internal sense" and that "the teacher may need to refocus his/her teaching supporting the development of learners' autonomy according to their individual needs, through an encouragement to reflect on their metacognitive knowledge and their beliefs about learning" (pp. 271-272).

Giving students the opportunity to make choices provides them with more control over their own learning and can increase engagement in the learning activity. However, students who are not accustomed to "choice" and are suddenly offered it in abundance could have a negative effect in a classroom environment. Therefore, it is not simply a matter of having students' making choices about what they want to study and how, but involves creating a framework which will help the students' choose how they want to learn best (Lamb, 2008, p.296). Granting that "choice" is a common characteristic of teacher and learner autonomy, and in order for students to make meaningful choices, "teachers need to encourage learners to reflect on what they are doing and why?" (Edge & Wharton, 1998, p.

296). In relation to choice, Vieira, Barbosa, Paiva, and Fernandes (2008) have an ideological viewpoint of teacher and learner development as a common framework, and argue that when given choices, education should be "transformative rather than reproductive" (p. 218). Thus, whilst recognizing the need for choice in teacher and learner development, the question that arises is how to create transitional stages of learning that will be transformative and pedagogically sound.

One approach by which teachers can facilitate learners to form choices and achieve their aims is through guidance and assistance from scaffolding, which was first introduced in the 1950's by the American cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner. The scaffolding metaphor can be interpreted as a framework of support offered to a child (or adult) as and when it is needed until the child (or adult) has gained complete competence and control of the task. Much of the literature on scaffolding theory is related to social constructivism, which pertains to how meanings evolve out of social encounters. Relating to Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, scaffolding is believed to share common characteristics with his writings on the zone of proximal development (ZDP) which is,

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent
> problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through
> problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.
> (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

J. F. Fanselow (personal communication, 4th April, 2009), in a Vygotskian tone, states that "providing ongoing challenges with just the right amount of external information for students to match with their internal information to discover meanings is the central classroom challeng." Fanselow, advises that, depending on the students success, teachers should adjust the challenge and create new ones accordingly.

Learner autonomy, much like teacher autonomy, requires one to take responsibility and control for one's learning and which involves a capacity for detachment, critical reflection and decision-making. This pertains to the teacher's professional development, as "the role of learner certainly applies when a teacher is engaged in an in-service programme of study, such as an MA." (Sinclair, 2008, p. 243). Just as learner autonomy is necessary for teacher autonomy, "teacher autonomy embodies the principals of learner autonomy in its self-directed professional development component" (p. 256).

Teacher Autonomy

From the teachers' perspective, autonomy can be seen as "the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching" (Aoki, 2000 p.3). This resonates with some of the main characteristics of learner autonomy such as having a degree of *capacity*, *freedom*, *responsibility*, and *choice*. McGrath (2000) posits that teacher autonomy as freedom from control from others will enhance greater control of one's self in "self directed professional development" (p. 100). Furthermore, McGrath defines two forms of teacher autonomy: one is associated with self-directed professional development and the other with the teacher as a researcher. McGrath also states that in order to foster autonomy among learners, teachers must be both free and able to assert their own autonomy in the teaching practice. Similarly, Smith (2000) denotes that teachers who aim to foster the development of learner autonomy need to start with themselves. According to Little (1995), autonomous teachers are those who have "a strong sense of responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis of the highest degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process" (p. 179). These characteristics of continuous reflection and analysis, parallel with the previously mentioned "capacity for detachment, critical reflection" relating to autonomous learners, which reinforces the interconnectedness between teacher and learner autonomy.

Keeping within the spirit of reflection, it is advisable to scrutinize all documented approaches within the literature, and not simply accept them at face value. According to Bynom (2003) teachers would benefit from caution against what seems to be thoughtless acceptance of new fashions in teaching without investigating them further. Critical reflection as well as decision making is needed. Widdowson (1998) similarly advises that we should, as professionals, not make changes in our practice indiscriminately. Devaluing approaches and ideas should be avoided as this can lead to a tendency of becoming "slogan prone," with the possibility autonomy will also becoming a trendy term with little meaning (p. 705). Widdowson further states, "A critical look at this slogan reveals a fundamental conceptual confusion" (p. 705), and therefore urges us to think more deeply about the appropriate use of terminology related to teaching.

In a similar fashion, Shaw (2008) implies that questioning and dialogue will help to avoid losing sight of what, why and when it is appropriate for us to foster autonomy. Shaw's research involved a group of teachers in Thailand who through dialogue and agreement collaboratively decided to remove the "tyranny of the timetable" (p. 194). The goal of this project was to foster more autonomous learning among the learners and teachers, in the sense that they would have more freedom from control. The findings revealed that learner autonomy, in this context, was a strain on teacher autonomy, as the teachers were not able to manage all situations that arose with students' as flexibly as possibly hoped. Shaw (2008) argues that the "pervasive rightness of learner autonomy is that solutions based on such a belief are perhaps not always what a student needs. Paradoxically, such beliefs might be a manifestation of the lack of teacher autonomy" (p. 210). This pertains to the argument for teacher autonomy as the goal of professional development. Shaw states that this work remains a work in progress, and consequently would like to explore the notion of the need for teachers to "author their own world." Holec (1980) asserts that "by proceeding largely by trial and error, he trains himself progressively" (p. 42) which holds as much relevance for the teacher as a learner, as it does their students.

Little (2000) on the other hand, believes that there is a relationship between the teacher and learner autonomy and provides a comprehensive explanation of why one is dependent on the other: (i) it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is like to be an autonomous learner; and (ii) that in determining the initiatives they take in the classrooms, teachers must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously, applying to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning. Smith (2003), claims that the enhancement of teacher and learner autonomy "in relation to a variety areas of pedagogical, attitudinal and content-related expertise can be argued to have intrinsic value within the teacher education programs, since teacher-learning is inevitably a largely self-directed process." (p. 1). Clearly there is a need for critical reflection, action research and exploratory practice where teachers and student-teachers engage in these practices.

Autonomous Tools for Teacher Development

Reflective Practice

As with learner and teacher autonomy, there is no single definition of the practice of reflection. It is certainly not an innovative idea, as Dewey (1933) affirmed that teachers need to reflect on their own ideas and practices to be better informed, otherwise, they are going to have a difficult time convincing their learners to appreciate and apply the same reflective principals. Closer to our time, Schön (1983) adopted the phrase "reflection-in-action" which can be described as reflecting in the moment of an action or "thinking on your feet" (p.68). This is distinguished with the notion of "reflection-on" and connects to theories, experiences, and knowledge when reflecting on an action (p.68). Schön (1983) describes how our actions can unfold before our eyes:

> The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (p. 68)

Vieira et al., (2008) affirm, "a *reflective approach* to teacher development offers the possibility of enhancing teacher *and* learner autonomous interrelated phenomena" (p. 219). Kumaravadivelu (2006) argues that "teachers can become autonomous only to the extent they are willing to and able to embark on a continual process of self-development" which is largely facilitated through what we know about teacher cognition (p.179). Teacher cognition, according to Borg (2003) is "what teachers know, believe and think… and play a pivotal role in teacher's lives" (p. 81). According to Johnson and Golombek (2002) "professional development emerges from a process of reshaping existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices rather than simply imposing new theories, methods, or materials on teachers" (p. 2). The authors follow this by affirming the importance of the descriptive accounts of teachers' perspectives of how they come to know, use, and re-define their knowledge over time. Borg illustrates that although teacher cognitions are not observable, they can be made explicit through four of the most widely used methods: self-report instruments, for example questionnaires; verbal commentaries, which may include structured interviews and think-aloud protocols; observation which could take place in real or simulated classrooms; and reflective writing, in the form of journals, autobiographies, and concept maps (p. 167).

Candy (1991) values the cognitive process of reflection. If, for example, a learner possesses a language journal, they can analyze their own reflections. Furthermore learners'

can share their beliefs and goals with fellow learners or a facilitator. In the same token, teachers' teaching philosophies or personal theories and beliefs can also benefit from the process of reflection as observable teacher cognition methods. Teachers, like language learners, can reinforce or transform their beliefs and discoveries by sharing them with other teachers in a way that is suitable to them (for example, face to face at work, through email or a wiki, and so forth). Personal theories, according to Hacker and Barkhuizen (2008), hold an integral place as a concept in professional development. Like Prabhu (1990) who argues that "different methods are best for different teaching contexts and there is no best method" (p. 166), Hacker and Barkhuizen (2008) claim there is no best qualitative research method. In their research, Hacker and Barkhuizen explored 20 participants' reflective personal theories of teaching as an interpretative study. The participants, who were all professional language teachers, were from a range of language backgrounds on the same twelve-week course called "second language course design and teaching methodology" (p. 165). The data collection methods were in the form of two sets of semi-structured interviews conducted at the mid and end points in the course. In addition, two forms of written journal entries were analyzed.

The findings of Hacker and Barkhuizen's (2008) research revealed that some student teachers had realizations about their personal as well as professional approaches to aspects of the course and their teaching. One student reflected, "I can say that the journal writing…has pedagogic value in helping me make explicit, implicit theories of teaching. My question to myself is why haven't I taken this journey before?" (p. 173). Another participant wrote, "I felt more confident that my opinions are also relevant to my teaching situation" (p. 176). From this study, Hacker and Barkhuizen recognized a cognitive, as opposed to a behavioral change among teachers, and state that "personal cognition is vital to their personal development" (p. 179). In relation to personal theory development, Kumaravadivelu (2006) asserts "teachers ought to be able to theorize practice and practice what they theorize…by helping them develop the knowledge and skill, attitude and autonomy necessary to construct their own context-sensitive theory of practice" (p. 173). The researchers conclude that developing personal theories of language teaching have the ability to generate confidence within the language teachers through the invaluable processes associated with reflectivity.

Borg (2009) asserts, "the study of teacher cognition is concerned with understanding what teachers think, know, and believe. Its primary concern, therefore, lies with the unobservable dimension of teaching – teachers' mental lives" (p. 163). Borg further alerts us

to the fact that "teacher cognition research has provided insights that allow us to interpret, in more sophisticated ways, results that show that teachers beliefs and practices are not aligned" (p. 167). Rather than focus on inconsistencies between a teacher's beliefs and practices, Borg presents exciting opportunities for deeper explorations of teachers cognitions, teaching and contexts. The student teachers who participated in Hacker and Barkhuizen's (2008) study took part in a process to develop the capacity for autonomy as students and learners. After reflection, the student teachers' voices illustrated that they could understand the theory and practice of teacher autonomy. This process also heightened "their awareness to the constraints of their own teaching contexts and the life-long learning needs of their own language learners" (p. 238). Thus, we have seen an example of how teachers' cognition, knowledge and learning can be developed and shaped through a "transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41), which has important implications for the development of teacher autonomy.

Lamb (2008) affirms, "the extent to which teachers have the capacity to improve their own teaching through their own efforts (through reflective or research-orientated approaches) clearly indicates one conceptualization of teacher autonomy" (p. 275). Moreover, doing interpretative research has benefits for the researcher and can open doors to further unanswered questions. This in turn may enrich one's development of both personal and professional knowledge and wisdom. It seems evident that personal knowledge, and experience "evolves over time, through determined effort. Under these circumstances, it is evident that teachers can become autonomous only to the extent they are willing and able to embark on a continual process of self development." (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 179). Therefore, action research can be seen as a tool to enhance autonomy as part of a teacher's professional development.

Action Research

Reflective practices in teaching may be particularly complementary to action research (Allwright, 1988; Burns, 1999, 2008; van Lier, 1996), as one of the steps involves reflecting on the informed action in the context in which it occurs (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1998). For a definition of action research, Burns (2009) states:

> Action research is the combination and interaction of two modes of activity – *action* and *research*. The *action* is located within the ongoing social processes of particular

societal contexts, whether they be classrooms, schools, or whole organizations, and

typically involves developments and interventions into those processes to bring about

improvement and change. The *research* is located within the systematic observation

and analysis of the developments and changes that eventuate in order to identify the

underlying rationale for the action and to make further changes as required based on

findings and outcomes. (p. 290)

In terms of professional development, action research can help teachers to develop their

reflective skills, which can be applied to materials or curriculum development (Kemmis &

McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1993; Hopkins, 1993). Additionally, both reflective and

research practices can combine elements of both theory and practice that "help legitimize the

complex ways in which L2 learners come to understand their experiences through multiple

discourses that theory has to offer (Johnson, 2006).

Vieira et al. (2008), recognizes that "autonomy is an ideological value-laden choice

whose purpose and outcomes need to be continuously scrutinised" (p. 217). The authors

further argue that "teachers' engagement in action research serves a two fold purpose –

teacher development and learner development – evaluation should focus on both teacher and

learner growth, involving the collection and triangulation of data from all participants" (p.

231). Vieira et al. (2008) examined three case studies of student teachers' development

practices through lesson observation, supervisory discourse, and journal writing. These

approaches provided a multi-dimensional perspective or a reflective approach to action

research. Diagnosis of the student-teachers' problems were "operationalized around four

main notions: reflection, experimentation, regulation and negotiation" (p. 222). Although

some of the participants were empowered to make decisions, Vieira et al. argue that these

decisions "are constrained by our agenda to promote autonomy in schools. Moreover…their

sense of direction is strongly affected by their sense of powerlessness as regards the school

culture and their lack of teaching experience" (p. 232). The pull between the ideal and the

possible lends more reason to be critically reflective and inquisitive when doing action

research. Shaw (2008) in his study choose not to ask the question, "Is this learning

autonomous? Rather, we need to ask: What does this particular group of students need at this

juncture in their academic careers?" (p. 191). Benson (2010) argues that teacher autonomy

"must involve a self-critical approach towards the ways in which structural constraints …are

mediated through the teachers' own agency" (p. 263).

Whereas Vieira et al. (2008) value the interconnectedness between teacher and learner autonomy, Shaw (2008) suggests that teacher and student autonomy may not be related, asserting, "my students will become autonomous users of English, because they have to, but autonomous learners? Students here don't have time for that. Who says so – well, they do: are *they* wrong?" (p. 201). Benson (2010) states, constrains on teacher autonomy takes many forms, for instance, educational policy, rules and conventions, textbooks and curricula. Vieira et al. (2008), given the constraints on the development of teacher and learner autonomy, emphasize the importance of *hope* in the possibility of enhancing teacher *and* learner autonomy as interrelated phenomena and hope that this phenomena will be part of teacher education and school pedagogy (p. 219). These studies have shown that although there is the potential for development of autonomy in practice, there is no doubt that the potentially paradoxical relationship between action research and teacher autonomy does not come without problems or constraints (Lamb & Simpson, 2003). Nevertheless, it would be favorable if teachers do not become discouraged by constraints that may arise when undertaking action research, and view it as part of the transformative process of development. Exploratory research and practice, like action research, can also provide opportunities for the teacher as a learner to grow, develop autonomously and acquire insights into how, why and when learning takes place.

Exploratory Practice

Disillusioned by previous research attempts in the 1980s, Dick Allwright developed an exploratory practice (a form of practitioner research), which would enable teachers to merge hands on practical research practices with pedagogy. According to Allwright (1999), the main purpose of exploratory practice is:

to meet this particular criterion by thoroughly integrating the investigative work into the normal work of the classroom, so that it neither requires significant extra preparation time, nor any unsustainable changes to classroom life. Exploratory Practice (unlike Action Research) is not intended to be a way of getting research done, but a way of getting teaching done, such that it includes a strong element of work for understanding, for both teachers and learners. (p. 8)

The following exploratory study also has implications for teacher development to better understand how and when teachers draw upon different knowledge types (conceptual

and perceptual) and how they influence a teachers practice at various times and in different contexts (Tardy & Snyder, 2004). The participants were 10 student- teachers whose reactions and reflections were examined in relation to using the concept of "flow." This concept was used as a tool for understanding more about teacher cognition, values and insights into their teaching practices. Flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996), is a mental state resulting from peak experiences. It occurs when the level of challenge is high but manageable given a persons skills. Considering that flow can occur at peak moments, these moments can motivate teachers, possibly re-configuring their classroom practices and give them insight into their teaching beliefs.

The setting of Tardy and Snyder's (2004) exploratory study was a private university in Turkey where the authors interviewed ten EFL student-teachers. The ten participants were initially read a short description and two examples of flow and were given an opportunity to address any unclear issues in understanding the concept. This was followed by a face-to-face open-ended interview. One of the aims was to establish if teachers experienced flow. The findings revealed that the teachers considered flow to be present when the students became so involved in the activity that they lost all concept of the "purpose" of the lesson (p.121). In a dialogue with one student-teacher she said that "…the teaching and the flow of the feeling of the instructor does not only depend on ourselves, it depends on the students" (p. 122). Other observations of flow occurred at times when the learners experienced a new grammar activity for the first time and when the teachers and students entered a dialogic engagement. These experiences of peak moments of flow during interactions with teachers and students and language appear to have interesting repercussions for teacher and learner development.

van Lier (1996) refers to Csikszentmihalyi's work throughout his book and compares the flow experience to Maslow's (1964) peak experience – when one has a time suspended experience while one is totally absorbed in the activity. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996), learning, like any activity, requires some conditions. In brief, there must be clear goals, immediate feedback, and challenges and skills must be in balance. In addition, distractions must be avoided and growth and transcendence must be enhanced through highlighting the autotelic nature of true learning (pp. 83-85). The reflection-in-action approach to exploratory research relates to decision-making where one has to think on their feet, as it takes place in the classroom in real time. Tardy and Snyder (2004), state that an

environment that supports autonomy is preferable to encourage authentic participation of students and teachers, which can enhance the number of flow experiences.

Tardy and Snyder assimilate flow to Prabhu's (1990) sense of plausibility. Prabhu asserts that student enjoyment results from positive teacher-learner rapport in his assertion that "engagement of the teacher's sense of plausibility is a major condition for classroom rapport. It is common to hear that learning is enhanced when learners enjoy classroom activity and is often equated with some form of light entertainment interspersed with more serious activity" (p. 173). Prabhu also recognizes that, considering the variety amongst different teaching contexts "professional effort, as a search for the best method which, when found, will replace all other methods" (p. 175). This exploratory research study has shown that, through using the concept of flow as a tool, a deeper understanding about teacher cognition and student learning have evolved and can be easily adaptable to any teaching context.

In another exploratory research study, Gunn (2010) investigated 13 MATESOL student teachers and teachers whose teaching experience ranged from very little to 22 years. Gunn, analyzed the student teachers' reflections in the form of journal writing assignments. The results were disappointing when at first, on inspection of the students' journals, only three out of the 13 students made any reference to the relationship between their individual teaching practices and beliefs about teaching. One of the problems was some of the students' prior lack of reflective practice on teaching created resistance. One of the advantages of exploratory practice is its continuous nature, which is what encouraged the researcher to pursue the study further. With time, as our teaching experience evolves, so too can our cognitive ability to reflect, although "experience alone does not lead to learning; reflection on experience is essential' (p, 219). Gunn, in analyzing her student teacher's reflective practices, concluded that students' willingness to participate was "unpredictable" (p. 220). Furthermore, Gunn observed that student teachers who are from a culture which has more written than oral communication, might have influenced the engagement levels in the journal writing activities. Despite this seemingly disappointing outcome, the author is confident that the students are in a better position to understand the positive aspects of exploratory practice than when they first started the course (p.222).

There will always be obstacles and resistance to autonomy, not only from teachers and language learners but also from stakeholders and institutions. Lamb & Simpson (2003)

affirm that integrating practitioner research into our teaching environments has the potential to empower or constrain and control teachers, depending on the degree of autonomy they have to ask questions and set critical research agendas (p. 60). Through gradual incorporation of reflective practices and action and exploratory research into our teaching and learning environments, we can develop our cognitive capacity, acquire new insights into our professional and personal development and become more autonomous. Nevertheless, teachers' lives are often very demanding, so in order for us be able to tackle challenges and deal with constraints, we need to be ready and equipped not just professionally but in a holistic sense, as human beings. The next section, Autonomy Enhancing Practices for Busy Teachers, will focus on how reflective practices, and metacognitive strategies that can enhance the potential for personal and professional growth.

Autonomy Enhancing Practices for Busy Teachers

Graves and Vye (2006), state that "in the midst of other demands, even the most conscientious of teachers may find it difficult to devote sufficient time to reflect on their own developmental needs in beneficial ways" (p. 157). The authors recognize the need for the development of inner autonomy, similar to Benson's views on personal autonomy (2010), and the importance of using developing metacognitive strategies for self-reflection in order to help "cope with whatever life throws at us" (p. 157). Self-reflection may be seen as a form of mental exercise, where instead of letting the mind wonder aimlessly, one has a focus and purpose and determination in one's thinking. In our personal and professional lives, self-reflection is both transferable and transformative, in the sense that we can reshape existing knowledge and beliefs to become better teachers and also better people. In response to the recognition that there are teachers working in stressful environments in Japan, Graves and Vye (2006) did extensive research in the form of an open-ended survey, with the aim to encourage teachers to share their self-reflective practices. The study was aimed at foreign teachers working in Japan. Responses were received from teachers who came from five different English speaking countries. They posted the survey to a TESOL graduate information web which encompassed current graduate students, alumni and professors. The authors found that some teachers were clearly working in stressful environments and "obstacles to autonomy are clearly not limited to the classroom" (p. 159). The findings showed that respondents all practiced a variety of self-reflection practices to facilitate

personal and professional development. The authors organized their findings under five categories: Mindfulness training, (meditation, yoga, art practices); Reading (TESOL articles, teaching logs, self-help materials); Writing (journals, language learning histories, lesson evaluations); Listening (learners, colleagues, conferences); Speaking (M.A peers, colleagues, friends).

Among the many responses, some said that writing journals increased confidence, clarification and organization of ideas on a personal and professional level. Other respondents replied that doing yoga and meditation helped them feel connected as well as "see life in a bigger picture." One can eventually become an autonomous yoga practitioner combining self-directed practice with support from an experienced teacher. There is also evidence that both yoga and meditation reduces stress and increases one's memory capacity (McCall, 2005). In addition, meditation is believed to increase energy levels and motivation (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). One meditation practitioner affirmed that "Teaching mindfully, I find new resources of energy, humor and confidence" (p. 164), which are arguably desirable attributes beneficial to both teachers and students. Graves and Vye describe how "meditation serves as a form of mental training that improves both cognitive activity and emotional stability" (p. 164). Overall, the authors found that reflective practices from one's personal life can have benefits and affect one's professional life in positive and meaningful ways, within which one can acquire autonomy and greater control of one's life.

Nevertheless, self-reflective practices also require time and effort, and self-determination. We may need to reflect on the strength of our personal and intrinsic motivations. van Lier (1996) describes "authenticity", not from the perspective of something taken from the world at large, for example newspaper articles or anything not especially prepared for the learner, but he refers instead to an authentic action (p. 13). This is "intrinsically motivated", and is authentic "when it realizes a free choice and it is an expression of what a person genuinely feels and believes" (p.13). van Lier believes that authenticity in the classroom is interrelated with morality and social responsibility, and relates to self-actualization, respect, and interpersonal relationships (p.125). Therefore, in order to engage in classroom practices "authentically," teachers must be true to themselves and to their students, otherwise they create falseness and futility. As this paper has aimed to deal with some of the realities of the pressurized lives of potentially autonomous teachers, engagement in self-reflection in personal as well as professional dimensions will hopefully

result in teachers channeling less reliance on "contextual support and more on their own self-counseling abilities to cope with whatever challenges they might face" (Graves & Vye, 159).

Summary and Conclusion

It appears that teacher education is most effective when it is blended with explicit approaches such as reflective practice, action research, and exploratory practice (Benson, 2010). This paper has introduced both theoretical and practical dimensions of reflective practice, action research and exploratory practice as three approaches that are believed to be effective for teacher development when integrated with practice (Allwright, 2003; Burns, 2009).

Within the scope of this paper, these approaches have been addressed respectively as teacher developmental processes and an attempt has been made to understand their implications for enhancing teacher autonomy. Defining and writing about autonomy is problematic and "notoriously difficult" (Allwright, 1988, 1990). Deciding on an all or nothing definition will always discriminate one perspective over another, and may risk excluding social, cultural, political or psychological dimensions.

This paper discussed how reflective practices develop teacher cognition, which can take the shape of critical reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983), whereby we develop our cognitive processes through, for example, self-reports, observations, dialogue or reflective writing. By engaging in these practices teachers can heighten their awareness of what they are doing and why, which can lead to realizations about how parallel our beliefs and teaching practices really are. Furthermore, by being mindful of the process of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983), we have the potential to make better spur-of-the-moment decisions within our teaching environments. Action research was also examined which can help teachers develop skills that can be transferable to other areas of teaching, for example materials development (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1993; Hopkins, 1993). Exploratory research can be seen as a flexible, adaptable and inquisitive process which is less about getting research done, and more of a way of getting teaching done (Widdowson, 1999). Finally, there was a brief discussion about how self-reflective practices can be incorporated into our

personal as well as professional lives believing that personal development can result in better teaching (Graves and Vye, 2006).

Within this paper some of the rewards as well as the constraints and complex issues of developing teacher autonomy have been acknowledged. In relation to reflection, some student teachers reflected that time and lack of expertise created resistance. Again we can be reminded and reassured that knowledge and experience "evolves over time, through determined effort… teachers can become autonomous only to the extent they are willing and able to embark on a continual process of self development" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 179). Thus, taking a balanced yet multi-perspective approach, we can endeavor to engage in and gradually enhance our autonomous tendencies through approaches of continuous reflection, action research and exploratory practice. Starting by reflecting on why and what are the benefits of these practices could be a catalyst to a process of life-long learning and development.

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