Chapter 62

Becoming Autonomous Learners to Become Autonomous Teachers:
Investigation on a MOOC Blend

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ABSTRACT

Autonomy appears to be a challenging concept for both language learners and teachers. This article attempts to ascertain the beliefs on learner autonomy (LA) and teacher autonomy (TA) of students on the MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at Coventry University (UK) engaging with this concept while reflecting on a distributed MOOC blend flip. This article explores the extent to which a MOOC blended into an existing curriculum can support students in their transition between LA and TA for their professional practice. The paper discusses the interpretations of autonomy in language education, including "technical", "psychological" and "political" orientations and illustrates two categorises of autonomous perspectives: independent learning and interdependent learning. The article also discusses how blended learning can support language teacher with re-thinking their role. It moreover illustrates, some constraints regarding fostering autonomy in practice and highlights some problematic areas in the reconceptualization of learning and teaching with a MOOC blend.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' beliefs seem to be a "key determining factor" in ELT (Klapper, 2006, p. 18) in relation to their teaching practice. According to Donaghue (2003), the teachers' prior experience as both learners and teachers may shape their "own world of thought and action" (Pennington, 1996, p. 340). In the light of the fact that the teachers' beliefs can be reviewed through teacher education (Borg, 2011), Donaghue proposes that students engaging in teacher education should be mindful of the role of personal perceptions in their training curricula (2003).

One of the dominant themes in the literature relating to professional language teacher education is autonomy. Ramos (2016) believes that future teachers' conceptualisation of the notion of autonomy is likely to adhere to their own learning experience. Some studies (Little, 1995, p. 180; Benson & Huang, 2008) suggest that not only should the teacher education curricula introduce students to the concept of LA, they should also provide those prospective teachers with an orientation on how to become autonomous teachers. In addition, teachers' beliefs are considered to be strongly influenced by the teaching context (Borg, 2003; Phipps & Borg, 2009). This variable should be taken into consideration in the teacher education programmes as, as argued by Sinclair (2000), the interpretation of autonomy is expected to vary according to different teaching contexts.

The integration of technology in language learning and teaching is opening new horizons of learner and teacher autonomy (Cappellini, Lewis, & Rivens Mompean, 2017) and providing new ways in which autonomous approaches can be fostered through a blend of formal and informal online learning settings, for example by blending MOOCs into existing curricula (Orsini-Jones et al., 2017). Hamilton states that "autonomy is problematic not only to define, but also to operationalise and evaluate" (2013, p. 17). According to Benson & Huang (2008), very little research has been conducted on how teacher education impacts upon the teachers' beliefs regarding autonomy. Although there are studies on MOOC blends and autonomy development (Orsini-Jones, 2015; Orsini-Jones et al., 2015; Orsini-Jones et al., 2017; Orsini-Jones, Gafaro & Altamimi, 2017), as far as the author knows, there are not any studies investigating the fostering of autonomy as a professional transition between LA and TA as a result of the engagement with a MOOC blend.

This study aims at exploring how the integration of blended learning with the FutureLearn MOOC *Understanding Languages: Learning and Teaching* as a part of a module on an MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at Coventry University impacted on students' beliefs on LA and TA, as well as the relationship between LA and TA as a professional transition.

Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy in Language Education

The conceptualization of autonomy in language learning and teaching is normally attributed to Holec (1981, cited in Benson, 2007, pp. 22-23), who defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Little (1991, p. 4) takes a wider look at the concept and defines it as a "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". The notion of autonomy is also used to describe learning situations (Benson, 2007). Dickinson (1987, p. 11) proposes autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions".

Reinder and White have re-conceptualized autonomy within CALL as a multifaceted construct operating on several levels (2016). The complexity of the notion of LA regarding its significant components has been explored in depth by Nunan, who mentions "degree of autonomy" (1997, p. 192). There are several kinds of "degree of autonomy" concerning the progression from "lower" to "higher" levels of autonomy (Benson, 2007). Benson (1997) classifies LA into three perspectives: (1) a "technical perspective" that focuses on the skills and strategies that learners should be able to carry out in order to succeed in unsupervised learning situations; (2) a "psychological perspective" that considers the attitudes and cognitive abilities that allow learners to take responsibility for their own learning process and (3) a "political perspective" that empowers students to take control over their own learning. Littlewood (1999, p. 75) outlines the distinction between two levels of this concept: "proactive" and "reactive" autonomy.

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