



Teacher education for learner autonomy

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“... teachers will hardly be prepared or able to administer autonomous learning processes in their students if their own learning is not geared to the same principles.” (Edelhoff, 1984: 189)

Even though this statement is more than twenty years old, my own experience from recent in-service courses for practising teachers is that it still holds true.

The aim of these courses was to support the participants in developing learner autonomy in their classes, in other words getting their learners actively involved in and becoming (co)-responsible for their own learning. Basically this meant providing them with the theory underlying autonomous teaching and learning as well as showing them how it can be done in practice (cf. Dam 1995). Young teachers who had just left teacher training college and who attended my courses told me that they knew how to do this in theory. However, the teaching they had themselves ‘received’ at the college had had no resemblance whatsoever with the theory. Most of the time, their teachers ran their classes in the traditional teacher-fronted and teacher-directed way, i.e. with teacher input followed by questions and class discussions. This would be the case whether the subject was theory about language learning, language learning itself, or the organisation of the language classroom including teacher roles and learner roles. These young teachers claimed that as soon as they were confronted with twenty odd children in their own classrooms, they would forget all about theory and grab hold of methods that they themselves had experienced either at the training college or, for some of them, as far back as their language classes as school children – methods that had nothing to do with learner autonomy.

Initial teacher training for learner autonomy

There is therefore no doubt in my mind that the initial teacher training as regards the development of learner autonomy had failed even though it appears as if the underlying principles behind

learner autonomy had been touched upon in theory. The quote by Christoff Edelhoff (above) proved right for these teachers.

Tarone and Yule (1989:7), quoted in Taylor (1990:7), point at the same problem: “*It is likely most teachers will themselves have been taught languages through a ‘traditional’ approach which might then have been reinforced in their initial training as ‘the way’ to teach.*”

The question is: How can newly educated teachers be expected to develop and how can they be supported in developing learner autonomy in their classes when they first start teaching? In other words, how can initial teacher training ‘hatch’ teachers for learner autonomy? What is needed? What is done? What should be done? In order to get some answers to these questions, the ‘Teacher education for learner autonomy’ worm will be sent on to:

- José Luis Vera, who for many years has had special courses for his students at his university in La Laguna, Tenerife, trying to teach as he preaches: How did he do it? With what results?
- June Miliander, Karlstad University, Sweden, who has successfully tried out the use of portfolio in initial teacher training.

A hint about what is needed for and/or missing in initial teacher education might also be given by the following. In spring 2007, I received a mail from an Austrian lecturer, Anja Burkert, who had read widely in the field of learner autonomy but never really experienced ‘how it worked’. She wrote (extracts from her letter quoted with permission):

Dear Leni,

.... X actually gave me your email address because I asked him about the video showing your autonomous learning class which he had told me about. I am doing my thesis at the moment (I thought "better late than never" and am

really enjoying it) and learner autonomy is one important aspect of it. Therefore I would love to see how learner autonomy really works. I have read some books about it but unfortunately our university has got practically nothing in this field. What's more I've never had the chance to see a teacher teach that way, nor do we, at least as far as I know and with maybe some exceptions, follow these principles in our courses at the university. I am really fascinated with the ideas behind this approach but as I said can't really imagine how it works in reality. Therefore I would like to ask you how I could possibly get hold of such a video.

Best regards Anja Burkert.

I shall therefore also forward the worm to Anja Burkert asking her to share with us her views on possible improvements when it comes to initial teacher education. Anja, who is a lecturer at Graz University, is at the moment (Autumn 2007) spending an academic year in London, working towards her PhD.

Finally, I shall refer to the story of Frank Lacey (the leading article in this issue of *Independence*), who had not come across the concept of learner autonomy in his initial teacher training, nor practised it in his own classes until he happened to 'run into' me – and the principles of learner autonomy. The result can be seen in his article.



Leni Dam recently retired from the position of pedagogical adviser and in-service teacher trainer at the Centre for Higher Education for Copenhagen and Northern Zealand, where she was responsible for the Diploma in Education. She had also been a practising secondary school teacher of English, at Karlslunde School, for many years.

In-service teacher education for learner autonomy

Frank Lacey's story is, I suppose, one of the success stories when it comes to a possible effect of in-service teacher education for autonomy. Therefore, on the one hand we have to improve initial teacher education for learner autonomy; on the other hand, we have to look into possible 'models' and 'underlying principles' for in-service teacher education that might make teachers change their practice towards learner autonomy. What can be done *after* initial teacher training? How can in-service teacher training be organised so that teachers can be prepared and become able to enhance autonomous learning in their students (cf. Edelhoff 1984:189)?

In a later issue of *Independence*, I myself will return to issues in in-service teacher education and will suggest possible solutions to these questions. For the time being, the worm will move on and be dealing with initial teacher education as outlined above.

References

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