

## THE CHALLENGE OF AUTONOMIZATION

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An experiment in futurology can give us an overview of the classroom our present students will face in a few years. This overview presents a continuum which goes from an ideal situation to a terrible environment for learning to happen. The positive side of the continuum would present a modern well equipped room filled with materials to work with. On the other hand, the other extreme would depict a hot crowded room with no resources. How should we prepare our present students and future teachers to act in any point of this continuum? This is our challenge.

Future teachers certainly need technical preparation: language competence, metalinguistic competence, theoretical competence in EFL, and teaching practice competence. But besides these basic areas, we argue that since we cannot predict where and under which circumstances they will work, they also need to be given some kind of practice in action research and autonomy. This way, they will all be able to search for better ways to exercise their job.

### **1. Action research**

Being able to identify a problem, to look for possible solutions in the theory, to design a plan incorporating theoretical input, to implement this plan, and finally to evaluate its results are part of the cycle of action research. Since contexts will be as varied as there are classrooms and teachers, more important than giving teachers-to-be recipes and ready made solutions, will be to give them the instruments or the methodology to help them find their own answers.

Wallace (2000) states that action research can be conducted by a teacher alone or it can be designed to accommodate collaborative action research with one or more

colleagues. He also mentions the importance of focus in action research, that is, to concentrate on the solution of one problem at a time. When one problematic area is improved, the cycle can start again in a spiraling process. Finally, Wallace argues for the need of setting a time range for each phase in action research, so the process does not get lost and diluted in such a long time that focus is hard to be kept.

Our present students could be introduced to action research and guided in experiments using this model in order to make them acquainted with its design. It would help them use it in the future.

## **2. Autonomy**

Autonomy is “a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times.”(BENSON, 2001:47). The classroom is a privileged context to provide autonomy experiences in order to empower students to follow their way independently beyond the classroom and according to their needs. The future teacher who goes through an autonomization experience will be more prone to pursue a career which will also worry about creating opportunities for his own students to be autonomous.

Several authors have shown interest in teachers’ preparation to become autonomous (AOKI, 2002; BENSON, 2001; DAM, 2003; KOHONEN, 2003; among others). The autonomization of the teacher is a necessary condition for him to provide opportunities for his students to become more autonomous.

Aoki (2002) mentions that teachers must believe students can become autonomous. In her opinion, teachers should provide choices to students and negotiate important actions with them. Students voices should be heard and taken into consideration to reflect on their learning process.

Benson (2001) stresses that the involvement of the teacher with his students is a crucial element in the implementation of autonomy practices in the classroom. Teachers should provide scaffolding for students to develop their autonomous behavior.

Dam (2003) also proposes a model for an autonomy enhancing teacher based on reflection. The author prepared a checklist for teachers who wish to evaluate their daily practice and see if they are promoting autonomous behavior in their classes. These classes can be divided in moments when the teacher is in command, moments when command is shared by teacher and students alike, and moments when the students are in command.

Kohonen (2003) proposes a collegial atmosphere in schools in order to provide a safe environment for teachers to develop their autonomous practice. This aspect corroborates the collaborative action research principles. A learning culture disseminated through colleagues demands administrative support which will be largely compensated by more motivated students.

In order for these experiences to happen, the teacher needs to share decision making procedures, delegate tasks, and even help learners take over the different levels of autonomous behavior. The challenges facing the autonomy enhancing teacher are enormous, once he/she needs to review his/her role in the classroom. Managing autonomous classes requires from the teacher not only sound theoretical knowledge but also focused attention to planning of actions, nevertheless accepting negotiated and creative learning situations which happen in any teaching situation.

### **3. Conclusion**

Preparing teachers for a classroom in the future whose scenarios can be as varied as the ones mentioned in the beginning of this text is not a simple task. We can rely, however on the words of Gibran. When prompted to talk about a teacher, he said

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind. The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding. The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it. And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct you thither. For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man.

In Gibran's wise words we can identify the essence of autonomy because teachers cannot do things for their students, but they can show the way and serve as structures for learners to develop their own knowledge.

Elements like perception, persistence, humanization, knowledge access, preparation to face challenges, and autonomy, are basic tools for a future teacher ready to work in any situation.

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