

The Challenge of Autonomization

Walkyria Magno e Silva
Universidade Federal do Pará

Introduction

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 considerably less favorable environment for learning to happen. The positive side of the continuum would present a modern well equipped room filled with materials to work with, well prepared teachers and interested students. On the other hand, the other extreme would depict a hot crowded room with no resources, a teacher who would not really know what he is doing there and students whose minds are “a-wandering.” Some complex social and economic situations, which probably are causes of this last depiction, cannot be solved right away in the classrooms, although we all are aware that on the long term education is the only thing that can really make a difference in this scenario. However, as teachers’ teachers, we can do something in favor of the professional who will act as the conductor of the action in these contexts. How should we prepare our present students and future teachers to perform in any point of this continuum of teaching situations? The answer to this question 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. These two concepts go hand in hand, once teachers

should foster autonomy, but they cannot do it if they are not autonomous themselves; action research is a proper way, in our opinion, to foster autonomy in the teaching field. Our role, as teachers' teachers is to provide opportunities for these two concepts to flourish, so, our students will all be able to search for better ways to exercise their job in the future and, by doing so, become more autonomous teachers.

1. Action research

Many authors have recently focused their attention on ways teachers can both develop themselves and find better ways to teach their classes (Nunan, Wallace, Edge, Moita Lopes, among others). 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, finally to evaluate its results, and maybe to publish them 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.

Nunan, when discussing action research, quotes Kemmis and McTaggart and Cohen and Manion, and stresses the idea that this kind of research started to be given attention in EFL classrooms in the decade of the 80s of the last century. The first two quoted authors defined action research as research conducted by teachers working collaboratively that aimed to change something in their classes. Cohen and Manion also think that action research should be done collaboratively and its main goal must be to find a solution to a specific problem in a specific context.

At the same time that Nunan values what these authors state, he disagrees mainly in two points. The first one is that action research does not need to be necessarily collaborative. He argues that a sole teacher is able to conduct action research in his own classroom. The second point is that action research does not need to develop into a change in action; it can result in change, but it can also result in the conclusion that no change is necessary or liable to be implemented in the context where the action research has taken place. Nunan accepts the idea of an action research cycle as a descriptive case study of a particular classroom, group of learners, or

even a single learner if it is initiated by a question, is supported by data and interpretation, and is carried out by a practitioner investigating aspects of his or her own context and situation. He believes that if this is done, it will probably result in change, but not necessarily will so.

Wallace accepts the two possibilities of agency when he 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, the need 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.

Edge discusses the paradox of the teacher researcher. He mentions the problem of research being too theoretical for a teacher and of classroom procedures being too practical for a theoretician. At this crossroad he sees the importance of building a community of teacher/researchers in order to solve the paradox, and thus, the importance of teachers conducting action research projects in their classrooms appears. He quotes authors, like Elliot, Kemmis and Taggart, Altricher et al., who all stress the change promoting characteristic of action research. It promotes changes not only in the way teachers teach their classes, but also in the way teachers *see*¹ their classes as *multi-possibility* environments. This is very clear in Clark's words when he mentions that "action research should contribute to the empowerment of individual teachers . . . our individual responsibility is not to attempt to impose large-scale change, but to act in our everyday exchanges with others in ways that instantiate the values that we value" (qtd. in Edge 5). Edge stresses, "The thinking teacher is no longer perceived as someone who applies theories, but as someone who theorizes practice . . . good teaching is right here, so long as we are working on developing it" (6). In this last quote, the change promoted by action research is clearly from the inside out, when teachers do not accept the role of applicationists, but rather assume the role of thinkers and developers of better ways to teach.

¹ Our emphasis.

Edge mentions that action research presupposes an attitude on the part of the teacher that privileges exploratory observation and participation with other teachers, thus creating a collegial atmosphere. All this will result in the empowering of self and others.

Distant from the realization of perfect finalized versions of research one might read in professional journals, we call teachers to try out action research, accepting the fact that, as Atkinson argues,

we do not have perfect theoretical and epistemological foundations; we do not have perfect methods for data collection; we do not have perfect or transparent modes of representation. We work in the knowledge of our limited resources. But we do not have to abandon the attempt to produce disciplined accounts of the world that are coherent, methodical, and sensible. (qtd. in Edge 11)

In Brazil, Moita Lopes was a precursor in spreading the word on action research. He believed, as many of us, that the dogmatic formation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers designed by applied linguists in specialized centers was generally too far away from the teachers' reality. He stated that the EFL teacher should receive critical formation as well as a theoretical one in order to be able to decide what would work in his context and what would not. Theoretical knowledge, as ideas on the nature of language and the nature of language learning, is a fundamental part of a future teacher's capacity. However, as important as this is the critical capacity about the production of knowledge, which can be achieved if the proper questions are asked. A critical reflection about his or her own work frees the teacher from knowledge produced by others and empowers him or her to look for answers to questions posed by his or her own interests. Therefore, the need to familiarize future teachers with research methods should be mandatory in teacher preparation courses. Moita Lopes argues that the ideal mode for starting teachers in these methods is action research seen as

a type of investigation done by people in action in a certain social practice about this practice, in which results are continuously incorporated to the research process, becoming a new topic of investigation. This way, the researchers/teachers will always be acting in the production of knowledge about their own practice. (185)

The author mentions the importance of the existence of a consultant in the initiation process of the teacher in action research. Therefore, we state that there is no better occasion to start future teachers in this kind of research than during their college years, when they are preparing to be teachers and are under the supervision of their professors.

In his book, Moita Lopes also suggests several research instruments that can be used to conduct action research as well as gives some guidelines for conducting this type of research. He stresses the importance of auto-monitoring in all steps of action research in order to identify problem areas. He also states that results should be publicized in order to close the cycle of action research. This publicizing of work can be considered as a discussion in the teachers' room, a talk in a PTA² meeting, or a presentation in a conference of any size and importance. We believe that this public phase of action research can be done also to show other professionals that it is not impossible to produce one's own scientific work.

Our present students could be introduced to action research and guided in experiments using this model in order for them to become acquainted with its design. It would help them use it in the future. When producing their own research according to the action research model, they would also be paving their way into autonomy.

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 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.

Benson proposes a model for the description of autonomy that entails three levels of control: over cognitive processes, over learning

² Parents and Teachers Association. In Brazil, the equivalent structure would be the *Conselho Escolar*.

management, and over learning contents. Control over cognitive processes involves reflection on how one learns better and implementation of actions that privilege these manners over others that are innocuous. This level of control can only be monitored through behaviors which are the outcomes of the cognitive processes; one can observe if one is really paying attention to something or if one is focusing on what should be studied. Control over learning management involves organizational skills on how to study. This level presupposes what should be learned first, when and where to study and other actions of the kind. Finally, control over learning content means that the learner goes beyond what is given to him in class and starts choosing what else he will learn. Benson states that all these three levels are interdependent and progress achieved in one level will support and enhance progress in others. However, it is not until all three levels have developed to a certain extent that autonomy is reached. Moreover, autonomy is not a state to be achieved, but a process which needs constant reworking in order to stay in activity. We have also argued elsewhere (Magno e Silva) in favor of the idea of an exponential understanding of autonomy, since we believe that each degree of autonomous behavior achieved will give way to several other possibilities of autonomy.

Several authors have shown interest in teachers' preparation to become autonomous (Aoki, Benson, Dam, Kohonen, among others). The autonomization of the teacher is a necessary condition for him to provide opportunities for his students to become more autonomous.

Aoki 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 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 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 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.

In a recent experience in one of our English Literature classes, we had to prepare something our students could do on their own during a class we could not be present. Based on the ideas of negotiation (Aoki) and leaving students in command (Dam), we gave them three choices of what to do when we were away. They could go together to the computer lab and research on the authors studied up to then in the course, they could go to the same lab and study one author we had not studied yet and present what they had found out to the classmates in a future class, or they could come to the class to prepare two posters about two of the authors we had already studied and put them up in the hall for all the other students to see.

The class discussed which activity they would be willing to do and decided for the last one. We, according to Aoki's prescriptions, believed our students could do a good job in making posters which would be both informational to students who would read them in the hall and indicative of what they had really learned about the authors studied.

Once the activity type was decided, we gave students the materials needed (scissors, glue, markers, and some big construction paper sheets) and told them they should negotiate how they would make the posters: as one whole group or divided in two smaller groups, each making the poster about one author. We also told them that they should decide on which information would appear in the posters, if they were to include pictures, if more research was needed or not, and all other aspects of the posters. We made them aware that all the discussions should be conducted in English, leaving Portuguese only as a last resource, if needed. Finally, we told them that presence to that class would be given to the names that appeared on the posters the next day we came to the university.

When we arrived in the university the following week, we saw two posters up in the hall: one on Charles Dickens and the other on Lewis Carroll. They had prepared the two posters together, the whole class being one group, so all their names were on both posters and we assigned presences to students who participated in the making of the posters. They decided to prepare similar posters to both authors, including pictures, a brief biography, most important works, and quotes of famous passages by both. The posters were well done and visually attractive, which we could easily confirm by the number of students we saw reading them in the following weeks they stayed up in the bulletin board.

More important than doing this specific task, what we feel our students learned was to make decisions, to take an active part in designing an activity and in choosing what they wanted to do. They assumed new roles that gave them an opportunity to exert control over content, management, and cognitive processes levels of learning with a high probability to expand it to other authors or to reading more of the authors they worked with. Besides, being a subject in an autonomy experiment like this one makes these students more prone to reproduce it in their future classes, mainly because we conducted a discussion about the process later on. For us, more important than the outcomes of the experiment was the fact that our students have experienced the action of choosing and have learned other ways to learn.

We are aware that 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.

In some ways this experiment was also a small action research project. While asking ourselves how our students could use their class time to autonomously learn something when we would be away, we negotiated actions in a participative action research. The outcomes were very positive for both teacher and students.

3. Conclusion

Preparing teachers for a classroom in a 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. By the same token, teachers can always develop their understanding of both classes and subject matter by conducting a spiraling sequence of action research mini-projects. The act of experimenting action research is in itself an act of autonomy, once it comprises individual theoretical study and search for materials. Eventually, the change caused by the cycle of action research will keep yielding new questions which, on their turn, will also be autonomously answered.

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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