



AUTONOMY IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Dr. John Adamson
University of Niigata Prefecture
johnadamson253@hotmail.com

Dr. Nehir Sert
Başkent Üniversitesi
nsert@baskent.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

As a consequence of the Turkish educational system's shift from a teacher-centred to student-centred approach in the academic year of 2005-2006, school curricula of all subject areas have moved towards the development of learner autonomy. In response to this institutionally-directed reform, this 'conceptual framework study' intends to both inform researchers about the development of learner autonomy in learning English as a foreign language, and teacher autonomy considering the pivotal role that teachers have in the development of learner autonomy. That European Language Portfolios (ELPs) increase in use worldwide as a means to promote autonomy also merits attention. For this reason, the study also tries to inform researchers about ELP use and assessment in the Turkish context, and to provide the wider research community with important local messages of issues surrounding ELP implementation in schools. It further debates the issue of assessment since it requires reconsidering with the advent of ELPs.

Keywords: learner autonomy, European language portfolio, ELP, foreign language learning, EFL

INTRODUCTION

In this review we critically analyse some of the main issues surrounding autonomy and make known how the main areas of exploration in this study - learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, European Language Portfolio (ELP) use and assessment -. Of particular importance is how these issues in the Turkish context relate to research from other contexts in Europe and Asia.

Learner autonomy

More recent trends look at the way in which learners are presented with the actual situations in which autonomy is expected of them, for example, when EFL students study at western universities in preparation for content-based instruction and need to use self-access facilities (Gardner & Miller, 1994) or when they are required to use portfolios (Little, 1995, 2000). There has also been a revival in the political debate surrounding the implementation of autonomous modes of learning particularly concerning the perceived imposition of western values of educational pedagogy on to Asian learners (Sinclair, 1997; Kubota, 2002; Holliday, 2003). Certainly, learner autonomy appears to have been labelled as a western concept deeply influenced by native speakers ideology. This concept rejects styles of all non-western learners including Turkish ones who have several characteristics in common with Asian learners. This ideology is argued as being potentially insensitive and racist towards Asian learners stereotyped as passive, and therefore ineffective learners (Littlewood, 2000). Holliday (2003) and Littlewood (2000) challenge this stereotype and argue that Asian learners, although influenced by teacher-led and exam-oriented school learning experiences, do have at their disposal critical and autonomous learning strategies. Furthermore, Benson, et al. (2003) see the common perception of learner autonomy as unfairly stressing the individual and rename it in the Asian setting as "autonomous interdependence" (p. 23) due to the preference among many Asian learners for collaborative modes of learning. This is a move to rebalance the concept of autonomy to accept that autonomous strategies of learning are actually part of an Asian learner's repertoire of learning strategies despite the years of exposure to teacher-led learning. The native-speakers version of autonomy should then be replaced by one which allows for social



autonomy, that is one which rejects the superficial western assessment of Asian learners as simply passive individuals who require “corrective training” (p. 112) to make them truly autonomous.

The recognition that learner autonomy should go beyond western definitions is also accompanied by an increasing body of literature outlining the importance of the “pedagogical dialogue” (Little, 2000, p. 3) between students and teachers, and among students themselves. This dialogue is seen as essential in the empowerment of learners, the encouragement of reflection about learning, as well as improvement in appropriate target language use. Additionally, it is an essential component in the “social mediation” (O’Malley et al, 1985) required to create a “social support system” to offer “cognitive related assistance” to newcomers in a class (Mohamed, 1997, p. 166). Biggs (1994) sees interaction as an important collaborative skill common among Asian learners, and Turkish learners yet often overlooked by western teachers seeking predominantly the development of individual learning skills in the classroom.

In order to facilitate this on-going dialogue to improve learner autonomy, it is also important for the teachers themselves to become autonomous in their own teaching and learning. Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are therefore interlinked (Smith, 2000; Little, 2000; Sert, 2006), suggesting that teachers whose pedagogical values are deeply entrenched in teacher transmission of knowledge have a negative impact on the learners’ progress towards autonomy. The teacher’s “central role” (Balcikanli, 2008, p. 281) in young students’ lives is paramount in this process as they are often seen as their model of language learning, mentors and advisors.

Teacher autonomy

As with definitions of learner autonomy, teacher autonomy too requires an individual and a social dimension, both which interact to mould a teacher who is personally self-directed, reflective of their own practice, yet able to collaborate and negotiate the learning-teaching process with fellow teachers, parents and students. This “social-interactive” dimension to the teacher’s life (Little, 2000, p. 1) is similar to the concept of “situated learning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in that knowledge and meanings are continually co-constructed in an ongoing dialogue. The importance of such teacher autonomy in their pre-service training itself is essential for teachers later to be able to engage constructively in dialogue about autonomy with students (Barton & Collins, 1993; Sert, 2006). However, the potentially pivotal role that teachers have in the development of learner autonomy, particularly in readying younger learners before embarking on autonomous tasks (Yildirim, 2008), may be endangered by negative attitudes towards facets of autonomy embedded in teachers before teacher training begins. In their own experiences of learning, or “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, p.60), teachers may have developed resistance to autonomy in a “hidden pedagogy” (Denscombe, 1982, p. 259) which reemerges when teaching practice actually begins.

Al-Mansoori (2008) furthers the role that autonomy plays in a teacher’s life to stress that it not only shapes professional life, but social life too, stating that an autonomous teacher is self-directed, reflective and collaborative in the community as well as at the workplace in a “life plan” or “strategy for life” (p. 36-37). This concept is echoed in Lynch’s (2001, pp. 390-391) proposal that autonomy is a concept to be practised both, within and outside of institutional boundaries. Autonomy, if exercised to its full effectiveness, needs to be an all-pervading philosophy of life shaping an individual’s personal cognition and behaviour in the community.

European Language Portfolio (ELP)

Turning to research in Europe, ELPs have been widely trialled over the past 10 years and are now being integrated into mainstream school education. Egel (2009) reports on the varied levels



of acceptance of the scheme in European countries, for example, in Holland where ELPs were negatively viewed, to the Czech Republic where they have been more positively received. Research from Turkey where ELPs have been trialled also points to some extent to the same issues of resistance as in Taiwan and Hong Kong in secondary schools where traditional assessment modes still prevail. Kirkgoz (2007) describes the recent shift in policy in Turkish education from traditional “pencil and paper tests” (p. 225) for assessment and notes wider acceptance of portfolio assessment as it is more “performance based” (p. 225), and is regarded as more accurately revealing a child’s language acquisition process. Neither Kirkgoz (2007) nor Tasdemir, et al. (2009) propose the wholesale replacement of the traditional Turkish testing system by portfolios but advocate a complementary system of both ELP and formal testing. This concurs with Little’s comments (2005) who recommends that formal testing procedures be retained to assess what areas of lexis, orthography, phonology and grammar students need to improve upon, as well as for course entry purposes. Tasdemir, et al. (2009) note that the success of ELP use in the Turkish context is dependent on the integration of co-operative learning in schools, a theory allowing for both traditional, standardised testing and more authentic forms of assessment such as through ELPs. Interestingly, they note that ELPs can be used not only to assess learner performance over time, but also that of the teacher as they are integral to the success of the ELP maintenance. The implementation of ELPs in a limited number of Turkish private schools is analysed by Mirici (2008) who notes that the generic assessment criteria (‘descriptors’) for the 10-14 age group have required some amendment to suit the Turkish context. Little (2005, p. 327) too comments on the limitations of the scale of descriptors as they focus “only incidentally on the qualitative aspects of language use” and are therefore difficult for personal assessment uses, especially for young learners. The descriptors are also argued as being impractical for transference over to formal testing as they are communicative in nature and purpose (Little, 2005).

Assessment

The issue of assessment is, however, one which gives rise to some debate. Chen (2006) in research into ELP use among Taiwanese learners determines that widespread ELP use is not possible as there have been misunderstandings about the assessment purposes. As standardised procedures are necessary for ELPs to replace or supplement formal testing, it is difficult to assure reliability and validity in assessment (Hamps-Lyon & Condon, 2000; Klenowski, 2002; Williams, 2000; and Dudley, 2001). Reliability and validity are seen as essential to satisfy educational bureaucrats if the objectivity associated with formal testing is to be achieved (Williams, 2000). Brown and Hudson (1998) state that ELPs intrinsically resist the idea of standardization of assessment; however, despite issues of psychometric integrity, Huot and Williamson (1997) and Moss (1994) regard the lack of reliability and validity in assessment to be less significant than the enormous benefits that can be achieved by regarding ELPs as “pedagogic tools” (Chen, 2006, p. 93). Interestingly, Tasdemir, et al. (2009) point to the reduction of impartiality in assessment through both teacher and student assessment of the ELP, yet still recommend that standardised testing schemes be retained and used alongside ELP assessment. In stark contrast though, Dudley (2001, p. 19) regards the use of portfolios for assessment purposes as one which fundamentally “distorts the concept and weakens its effectiveness.” Little (2005) too, despite being a proponent of ELP use, warns of the difficulties faced by students from traditional teacher-led testing systems when assessing themselves for the first time. Others (Song & August, 2002; Hamps-Lyon and Condon, 2000) do see great potential in actually replacing formal testing with ELP assessment. The basis for this stance is that formal testing, particularly for writing, is regarded as being “discriminating” (Hamps-Lyon & Condon, 2000, p. 61) against ESL students and ELPs can allow both native and non-native writers of English to exhibit a wider range of skills in drafting and planning, competences which cannot be assessed in formal writing tests (Reutten, 1994).



Further to the debate surrounding assessment, in educational cultures which stress examinations as a single form of assessment, some teachers tend to regard the time needed for ELP maintenance (for students and teachers) as a burden (Chen, 2006). Students accustomed to receiving grades reported in Chen's (2006) research some dissatisfaction when work included in their ELPs was ungraded. Similarly, Lam and Lee (2009) in research in Hong Kong reveal that school teachers and parents perceive the official curriculum's overwhelmingly exam-focus as being more of a priority than the time and effort needed to work with portfolios. The benefits of keeping portfolios in traditionally exam-oriented educational cultures are still recognised by Lam and Lee as they promote student autonomy, increase support for the learning process, and raise student awareness of the differences between studying for examinations, i.e. assessment on purely the product of taking a test and keeping a long-term ELP. However, similar to Chen (2006), frustration was reported among students who did not receive assessment grades of drafts of essays and only on their final versions. In response, Lam and Lee (2009) and Little (2005) recommend that students receive a grade in formative assessment of ELP work as well as for final summative assessment.

To sum up, this review of learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, ELP and assessment has attracted attention to the essential role that the social context plays. The collaborative process among learners and teachers has been emphasized and we have argued that ELP use may still best be seen as a pedagogic tool to work alongside a social context which promotes personal independency and interdependency in harmony.

References

- Al-Mansoori, K. (2008). Symposium on learner autonomy. In Beaven, B. (Ed.), *IATEFL 2008 Exeter Conference Selections*. (pp. 34- 37), Canterbury: IATEFL.
- Balcikanli, C. (2008). Fostering learner autonomy in efl classrooms. *Kastamonu Education Journal*, 16(1), 277-284.
- Barton, J., & Collins, A. (1993). Portfolios in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(3), 200-210.
- Benson, P., Chik, A., & Lim, H. (2003). Becoming autonomous in an Asian context: Autonomy as a sociocultural process. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives*. (pp. 23-40), New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Biggs, J. (1994). What are effective schools? Lessons from East and West. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 21(1), 19-59.
- Brown, J. D., & Hudson, T. (1998) The alternatives in language assessment. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 653-675.
- Chen, Y-M. (2006). EFL instruction and assessment with portfolios: A case study in Taiwan. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(1), 69-96. http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/March_06.pdf. Accessed 14 August, 2009.
- Denscombe, M. (1982). The 'Hidden Pedagogy' and its implications for teacher training. *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, 3(3), 249-265.
- Dudley, M. (2001). Portfolio assessment: When bad things happen to good ideas. *English Journal*, 90(6), 19-20.
- Egel, I. O. (2009). The yesterday and today of the european language portfolio on Turkey. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 9(1), 1-16. <http://pkukmweb.ukm.my/~ppbl/Gema/gemacurrentissues.html>. Accessed 14 August, 2009.
- Gardner, R. C., & Miller, L. (Eds.) (1994). *Directions in self-access language learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Hamp-Lyons, L., & Condon, W. (2000). *Assessing the portfolio: Principles for practice, theory, and research*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton.
- Holliday, A. (2003). Social autonomy: Addressing the dangers of culturism in TESOL. In D. Palfreyman, & R.C. Smith, (Eds.), *Learner Autonomy Across Cultures: Language Education Perspectives*. (pp. 110-126), New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huot, B., & Williamson, M. (1997). Rethinking portfolios for evaluative writing: Issues of assessment and power. In K. Yancey & I. Weiser (Eds.), *Situating Portfolios: Four Perspectives*, (pp. 43-56), Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Kirkgoz, Y. (2007). English language teaching in Turkey: Policy changes and their implications. *RELC*, 38(2), 216-228.
- Klenowski, V. (2002). *Developing portfolios for learning and assessment: Process and product*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Kubota, R. (2002). The author responds: (Un) Raveling racism in a nice field like TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36 (1), 84-92.



- Lam, R., & Lee, I. (2009). Balancing the dual functions of portfolio assessment. *ELT Journal*, Advance Publish April 6th, 2009, 1-12. <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/cgi/content/full/ccp024v1>. Accessed 14 August, 2009.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Little, D. (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System*, 23(2), 175-181.
- Little, D. (2000). We're all in it together: Exploring the interdependence of teacher and learner autonomy. Proceeding of the 7th Nordic Conference and Workshop on Autonomous Language Learning, Helsinki, September 7th, 2000. <http://www.iatefl.org.pl/sig/al/all.html>. Accessed 14 August, 2009.
- Little, D. (2005). The common European framework and the European language portfolio: Involving learners and their judgments in the assessment process. *Language Testing*, 22 (3), 321-336.
- Littlewood, W. (2000). Do Asian students really want to listen and obey? *ELT Journal* 54(1), 31-36.
- Lortie, D.C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lynch, T. (2001). Promoting EAP learner autonomy in a second language university context. In J. Flowerdew, & M. Peacock (Eds.), *Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*. (pp. 390-403), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mirici, I. H. (2008). Development and validation process of a European language portfolio model for young learners. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 9(2), 26-34.
- Mohamed, O. (1997). Counselling for excellence. In D. McNamara & R. Harris (Eds.), *Overseas students in higher education*. (pp. 156-172), London: Routledge.
- Moss, O. (1994). Validity in high stakes writing assessment: Problems and possibilities. *Assessing Writing*, 1, 109-128.
- O'Malley, M., Chamot, A., Stewner-Manzanares, G., Kupper, L., & Russo, R. C. (1985). Learner strategies used by beginning and intermediate ESL students. *Language Learning*, 35, 21-36.
- Reutten, M. K. (1994). Evaluating ESL students' performance on proficiency exams. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 3, 85-96.
- Sert, N. (2006). EFL student teachers' learning autonomy. *Asian EFL Journal* 8 (2), 180-201.
- Sinclair, B. (1997). Learner autonomy: The cross-cultural question. *IATEFL Newsletter*, October-November, 139, 12-13.
- Smith, R. C. (2000). Starting with ourselves: Teacher-learner autonomy in language learning. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath, & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future directions*. (pp. 89-99), London: Longman.
- Song, B., & August, B. (2002). Using portfolios to assess the writing of ESL students: a powerful alternative. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 11, 49-72.
- Tasdemir, M., Tasdemir, A., & Yildirim K. (2009). Influence of portfolio evaluation in cooperative learning on student success. *Journal of Theory and Practice in Education*, 5(1), 53-66.
- Williams, J. D. (2000). Identity and reliability in portfolio assessment. In B. Sunstein & J. Lovell (Eds.), *The Portfolio Standard*. (pp. 135-148), Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Yildirim, O. (2008). Turkish learners' readiness for learner autonomy. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*. 4(1), 65-80.