From Here to Autonomy: The Creative Practice of English Learning and Teaching

Vye, Stacey Louise (英語教育開発センター・准教授)

1. Introduction

As a researcher in English education, I have consistently found the pedagogy of learner autonomy has an influence in inspiring some teachers to conduct an arduous re-examination of objectives to better suit their learners’ English needs. However, along with a renewed determination to improve their teaching, I have also observed that teachers often encounter a challenging period of frustration while attempting to apply autonomy-based approaches in a practical manner. Previous research has been published on this subject with my former research partner Ms. Graves, who passed away prior to the launching project (Graves and Vye, 2006; 2009, 2012). The aim of the project then has altered slightly due to the current situation: in addition to being a useful publication for teachers interested in developing learner autonomy and helping students and faculty to thrive at doing better, it is also becoming a tribute to my respected colleague’s life work of service and teaching.

2. Purpose

To remedy the situation of teachers feeling frustrated while encouraging student-centered teaching, this extensive action-research publication is aiming to support multiple teacher-researchers at Saitama University and other institutions by investigating challenges and success stories of facilitating autonomy in the courses taught in English. The publication, which has multiple publishers currently interested in the project, and chapter authors have written their second drafts in a previous MA course. The aim of the book is an overview of teacher narratives that detail the promotion of learner autonomy in the language education context in Japan, explores the stages that teachers commonly go through as they implement autonomous language learning activities, and considers how teachers can analyze their unique contexts to decide how best to help their students develop a greater degree of autonomy that should be relevant to the context of the Saitama University teachers and other in institutions, both national and internationally based.

3. Building the writing project from teacher narratives about learner and teacher autonomy in language learning

The narratives are from Japan-based English in-service teachers from an American graduate school in a course entitled “Facilitating Autonomy in Language Learning.” Before the beginning of the course, the first stage of this writing project was that these international and Japanese national teachers wrote a 500-1000 word essay covering the following: 1) define what they understand by the term “autonomy,” 2) explain how autonomous they believe they are in their teaching situation(s) with reference to their teaching context and personal direction, and 3) explain in what ways autonomy is present in their own classes. These essays received feedback from their instructors Ms. Graves and me. For the second stage of the project, along with the knowledge the teachers discovered themselves through readings and reflections and what was learned in the course including feedback on the essays from the instructors, the teachers then rewrote their essays. The teachers were specifically asked to reflect on the feedback from their pre-course assignments, class readings and discussions, in order to re-write their essays including 1) how their ideas about autonomous language learning practices have developed during the course and 2) how they intend to promote autonomy-facilitating strategies in their teaching practice in the future in the APA format, which is based on the guidelines of the American Psychological Association. Then, after the drafts were submitted, further feedback was given to the in-service teachers by their instructors. The third stage of the project is not completed, but will include 1) how their ideas about autonomous language
learning have continued developed after the course was over (in some cases some years ago), and 2) how they are currently promoting autonomy-facilitating strategies in their teaching practices with relevant and up-to-date references to justify their narratives.

4. Current state of the project and future goals

As mentioned in the previous section, the third stage of the project is currently underway:

1) how their thoughts about autonomous language learning continues to develop after the course was over from the previous year or more, and

2) how they currently promote autonomy-facilitating strategies in their teaching contexts with relevant and up to date references to justify their chapters.

While the broad focus of the project is examining ways in which learners may increase their self-directed skills, the primary aim is to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers assist students to develop autonomy within themselves and consequently to become better able, as well as more motivated, to direct their own learning and teaching. However, how does the project stand at its current state? The writer’s workshop could not be conducted to date as the amount of the project grant requested could not be secured and the writers are being contacted via email. Moreover, my computer’s main-board at Saitama University crashed at the end of Semester B, 202-2013 and could not be repaired. Being without a computer in my office, I could not contact these former MA candidates and in-service teachers, nor edit chapters at work. As a necessity, the funds were used to buy a computer for this project, for my daily work, and for my JSPS Grant research. Nevertheless, the writing is well underway and inexpensive ways of publishing are being explored through the Japan Association of Language Teachers and other publishers.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this project is still a work-in-progress during the third re-write of the essay narratives and effort is needed to secure the necessary funds for publishing, yet the goal of the project is the book should be a useful publication for teachers interested in developing learner autonomy and helping students and faculty to thrive at doing better learning and teaching in practice. It also serves as a tribute to one of the teachers, Ms. Graves who was the head instructor in a graduate school MA course, “Facilitating Autonomy in Language Learning,” for her life work of service and teaching.

References

