Involving Language Learners: Success Stories and Constraints

The IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG one-day conference at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

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Jointly organised by the University of Duisburg-Essen Department of Anglophone Studies and the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG, this was a relatively small one-day conference on learner autonomy issues, with a strong narrative emphasis and sense of interconnection between the themes that the three plenary speakers, Leni Dam, Lienhard Legenhausen and Markus Ritter, dealt with. About 100 people attended the conference, which, apart from the plenaries, included many different morning and afternoon presentations, grouped together by themes into combined ‘workshops’ (such as Involving learners in the digital world, Supporting learner autonomy in content and language integrated learning, and Developing teacher autonomy). The conference ended with a plenary Q&A session, after which people headed off in small groups to the outdoor Essen Christmas market for some mulled wine and convivial evening meals together. In this report I would like to focus just on the three plenaries from this excellent one-day conference.

Leni Dam started the day off with a personal account of her own engagement with learner autonomy in the first part of her teaching career. She shared with us how she had moved towards developing learner autonomy with the children she taught in Denmark from the 1970s onwards. Leni argued that she was not talking about a particular method, but a set of values oriented towards the dignity of the learner, the importance of personal choice, the significance of responsibility and the joy of creativity. Putting forward the rationale for different teaching decisions with extreme clarity and conviction, and in a very practical way too, Leni used examples of different learners as the basis for the claims that she made. Her lecture provided great encouragement for teachers dissatisfied with conventional teacher-centred pedagogies and/or finding their way towards developing autonomous learning.

In the following plenary Lienhard Legenhausen looked less at values and more at principles (theoretical, guiding and procedural) in developing autonomous language learning. Included were the interactionist hypothesis (or ‘learners have got to use the language in order to learn it’) and the learner’s right to their interlanguage at different stages of their second language development. Lienhard argued for three guiding principles for developing L2 use (and by implication learner autonomy), namely: (i) authenticity of interactions, (ii) reflectivity/awareness, and (iii) learner evaluation of learning processes and learning products. He developed these into a working model of autonomous learning and then showed with data from the 4-year longitudinal LAALE (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Learning Environment) project how Danish
learners in an autonomous learning environment could, from the ages of 11 to 15, achieve better interactivity and fluency, better accuracy and grammatical competence than a similar age group of German learners in a conventional textbook-driven learning environment. Although Lienhard modestly characterized his plenary as ‘old hat’, I found the examples that he used highly persuasive and interesting, particularly the peer-to-peer talk in Grade 8 where a group of learners spoke in English with each other with compelling naturalness and sophistication.

The third plenary by Markus Ritter took place later in the day and looked at teacher autonomy from the perspective of teacher education. Markus raised different questions (such as *What is the ideal English teacher? What constraints do you face in your education? What has been an outstanding learning experience for you?*) at various points in his plenary, before showing video clips of his MA students responding and voicing their own points of view. This was an impressively effective and thought-provoking way to bring multi-vocality into the conference plenary. The focus moved from concepts and definitions of teacher autonomy (including the Shizuoka definition of teacher autonomy), to constraints and realities, projects and practices. Of particular interest was the way that Markus situated the pre-service work that he, his colleagues and their students are doing against recent educational laws in Rheinland Westphalia and a huge study called DESI (Deutsch-Englisch-Schülerleistungen-International). Looking at the development of foreign language ability in secondary school learners across 220 schools, the DESI research project found that many actions and processes deemed necessary for developing autonomous learning were simply not present in secondary school language lessons and that generally there was a very low use of English by pupils in language classes. In other words, the values that Leni Dam had focused on and the features of the working model that Lienhard had earlier proposed were largely absent from secondary school English language education in this part of Germany.

According to Markus Ritter, a good part of the problem could be traced back to the overly theoretical and practice-separated teacher education that universities are still providing. As a counterpoint to this—the good news part of this fascinating afternoon plenary—Markus showed how the teacher education that he is involved in has been trying to bridge the theory-practice gap by including *Skills Days* at the university (where secondary school children come for a day of learning on small projects designed and led by teacher trainees/MA students), *Tandems* (personalized language learning exchanges and projects), as well as action research into individualized language learning, and the use of teacher education portfolios for developing alternative assessment practices.

Markus Ritter also mentioned briefly The Council of Europe’s EPOSTL (*The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*), which is “a document intended for students undergoing their initial teacher education which encourages them to reflect on the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages, helps them to assess their own didactic competences and enables them to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education” (Newby et al., undated). EPOSTL links into CEFR and the European Language Portfolio and provides a comprehensive overview of complexity of language learning and teaching as interpreted within a European context. The figure further below shows the seven areas (assessment of learning, independent learning, conducting a lesson, context, methodology, resources and lesson planning) where trainee teachers using EPOSTL are asked to self-assess their knowledge, competences and their progress as they go through their initial teacher education.
Going on other sessions at the conference, it seems that EPOSTL has created something of a pan-European buzz. It is being used by major universities (like the University of Vienna) in their pre-service teacher education programmes, so I expect we will hear more about this in the coming years. Just five years ago, Karen Johnson (2006) talked of the ‘socio-cultural turn in second language teacher education’ and put forward four interconnected challenges: (a) theory/practice versus praxis, (b) the legitimacy of teachers' ways of knowing, (c) redrawing the boundaries of professional development, and (d) ‘located’ L2 teacher education. It is possible to see EPOSTL as something of a response to such challenges. But how an instrument such as EPOSTL can be used as a negotiated tool of teacher education—as Little (1995) would argue is necessary for the development of teacher autonomy—remains to be explored and reported more widely. Personally, I was rather more convinced by the local project initiatives such as Skills Days that Markus Ritter talked about.

Figure 1 Seven areas of self-assessment for teacher trainees using EPOSTL (Newby et al., undated)

Overall, this was a very interesting trio of plenaries for a one-day conference, where the similarities and contrasts between the three areas of focus worked to good effect. The organisation of the conference was simply excellent, and the hospitality shown by the hosts outstanding. Yet, I can’t help feeling that plenary lectures in themselves are somewhat at odds with a conference on autonomous learning! Just once (at least!), it would be intriguing to attend a one-day conference where, at the start of the day, participants are asked to talk about their goals and then to create a project in small groups, work on this project through the day, before sharing their work with other participants later the same day. I wonder why we never get round to trying that at conferences these days.

Note
1. The Shizuoka definition is an extended definition of teacher autonomy (Barfield et al., 2002) that emphasizes: negotiation skills; institutional knowledge in order to start to address effectively constraints on teaching and learning; willingness to confront institutional barriers in socially appropriate ways to turn constraints into opportunities
for change; readiness to engage in lifelong learning to the best of an individual’s capacity; reflection on the teaching process and environment; and, commitment to promoting learner autonomy. Ritter touched on many of these aspects in his plenary talk.

References

