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# **Autonomous Language Teaching: Pre-requisite to Autonomous Language Learning**

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## **Biography**

### **Background and Rationale for Study**

In a recent report on the teaching of modern languages in post-primary schools in Ireland the Inspectorate found ‘an over-reliance on textbooks and past examination papers’ (*Inspection of Modern Languages*, DES, 2004). A survey that I carried out among educators (supervisors and mentors) and student-teachers supports this finding: 55 per cent of student-teachers and 50 per cent of mentors believed that teaching was ‘principally a matter of getting students through examinations.’<sup>1</sup> Interestingly however, a much higher percentage of respondents, 77 per cent of student-teachers and 100 per cent of mentors, believed that teaching should be about something quite different: it should involve learners in taking a more active part in their learning by involving them in planning, monitoring and self-assessing, characteristics respondents associated with the ‘good’ language learner.

The DES Inspectorate has argued that teachers need to encourage ‘greater learner autonomy’ (*ibid.*), and the *White Paper* (DES, 1995, p.60), published almost ten years previously, implied this as well when it called for an ‘essential shift...from external examinations to internal assessment that includes ‘projects, orals, aurals and practical work, ‘and for formative assessment that is intended to be ‘an integral part of teaching and has a key part to play in a process that is intended to be learner-centered (*ibid.* p.59).

### **Outline of Paper**

This paper addresses my concern about a lack of coordinated support being offered to student-teachers in the context of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), and about how a more learner-centred approach to language teaching is required. Addressing this concern in the context of my Ph.D. involved examining the impact of autonomous language teaching and learning that made use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP)<sup>2</sup> and that inspired the development by me of a professional portfolio. It should be noted that while referring to the ELP this paper focuses on the impact of autonomous language teaching supported by the professional portfolio<sup>3</sup>. A central thesis of the study is that in order for autonomous language learning to take place there must first be autonomous language teaching. First, I outline the context of the study before offering a brief overview of key points that the literature has to say about the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and autonomous language teaching and learning. I outline the action research approach of the study, the data collection process that took place

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. survey ‘The European Language Portfolio in the Context of Pre-Service Language Teacher Education: Reflection, Interaction and Autonomy: Farren, Patrick (TCD, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> ‘The European Language Portfolio in Pre-Service Language Teacher Education in Ireland: reflection, interaction and autonomy’, Farren, Patrick, Ph. D. thesis: Trinity College, Dublin, (2008)..

<sup>3</sup> For an account of impact of autonomous language learning that made use of ELP see forthcoming paper in TEANGA (25), journal of the Irish Research Association for Applied Linguistics (IRAAL)..

over two years and that involved focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire. Year two represents a more focused, and intensive study than year one. Finally the paper offers a summary of the principle findings.

### **Context of Study**

The paper is set in the context of modern language teacher education on the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), 2003-2005. the process has led to the development of a professional portfolio across the whole PGDE programme in NUIG. Interestingly, a professional portfolio is required by the Teaching Council of Ireland to form part of all PGDE programmes in Ireland from 2011.

The traditional Leaving Certificate examination is mainly a terminal and written examination that pupils take at the end of two years of study. This examination is a high stakes examination that has the merit of offering anonymity to all candidates and a level playing field. Generally, higher education institutions offer places on courses to candidates based on a points' system in this examination. Findings from a preliminary survey referred to above, showed that PGDE educators had different expectations of student-teachers, e.g. several supervisors believed that student-teachers were often 'obliged {by their mentors} to follow what {was} in situ... outdated methods'.<sup>4</sup> In addition, in the context of focus group discussions several mentors reported that oral-aural skills were not given the attention they merited in junior cycle because these skills were not assessed until the final year of senior cycle, i.e. usually at the end of five years of study. While the traditional Leaving Certificate had some merit in the past there is need for the assessment process to support anticipated teaching and learning behaviour. I argue that in order for this to happen a more coherent initial teacher education approach is needed.

By good fortune In the Spring of 2003 I came upon a version of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), developed by the Centre for Language and Communications Studies at Trinity College Dublin for Irish post-primary schools, that had been validated by the Council of Europe. It had recently been launched on the market as a reflective process tool intended to mediate the *Common European Framework of Reference for teaching, learning and assessment* (CEFR, 2001). Eureka! It struck me that the ELP was the catalyst that could help to bring about change in language learning. As I read its tenets I became convinced of its potential to support autonomous language learning.

### **The European Language Portfolio**

The ELP has two functions a), reporting and b), pedagogical. In the Passport the learner records any significant intercultural experiences (s)he has had, e.g. those achieved in formal contexts, such as certified courses, formal language qualifications, or intercultural experiences in informal contexts. The learner records his/her own language proficiency. The second part of the ELP is called the Biography. This supports the development of the learner's metacognitive capacity, i.e. planning, monitoring and self-assessing in the target language that is linked to a criterion-referenced system of descriptors drawn from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR). The third part of the ELP is the Dossier. It supports the development of learner responsibility, e.g. (s)he is expected to select pieces of evidence that demonstrate learning according to their preferred learning style(s). In short, the ELP supports the development of the learner's self-awareness and identity as a language learner and language user.

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<sup>4</sup> Ph.D survey: Farren, P. (2008).

In my reading I found evidence that the ELP was an effective learning process tool, e.g. Ridley reported that it helped pupils to 'apply their metacognitive knowledge effectively' (Ridley, 1997, p.14), and the official evaluation of the ELP carried out Schärer found that the ELP:

led pupils and teachers to reflect on the reasons for learning languages, learning process, and the criteria by which learning might be evaluated. 68% of pupils felt that the time they spent keeping an ELP was time well spent. 70% of teachers found that the ELP was a useful tool for pupils, while 78% found that it is a useful tool for teachers.

(Schärer, 2000, in Little 2002, p. 184).

More recent literature supports this view, e.g. Kohonen (2006) claims that the CEFR offers a new paradigm in language education, an action-oriented notion of communication. It offers new goals in language education (CEFR, 2001, p.5; Byram, 2003; Kaikkonen, 2001, Kohonen, 2006, p.3). The language user is understood as a person who uses cognitive, emotional, and volitional resources and abilities to achieve aims of communication (Kohonen 2007). Kohonen has argued that intercultural communicative competence involves the development of autonomy as a person in relation to others (ibid.). All the above are inherent in the ELP.

## **Brief Overview of Literature on Autonomous Language Learning and Teaching**

### **Independence and Interdependence**

I referred above to the DES inspectorate's call for greater learner autonomy (DES, 2004) and to the *White Paper's* call for learner-centered education (DES, 1995, p.59). It would be appropriate, therefore, at this point to relate to what the literature has to say about the concept.

In the 1970s the term autonomy referred to self-directed learning that was associated with learners working in isolation both from one another and from the teacher. However, generally, in more recent literature the term is used to refer to self-directed learning that is associated with learning involving a social dimension (Thomson, 1996, p. 78; Kohonen, 2000, p.18; Little, 2001), and by implication, 'collaboration and interdependence' (Benson, 2001, p. 12). Indeed, several researchers argue that cognitive development and human interdependence are interlinked processes (Allwright, 1990, p.12; Little, 1995, p.178; Benson, 2001, p.12). Vygotsky in his theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) argued that social interaction was the basis for higher order cognitive development. He defined ZPD as:

the distance between actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

(Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

Central to autonomous learning is the notion that learners have an active role in constructing knowledge (Terwell, 1999, p.195). Interestingly, Kohonen (2006) has argued that in 'socio-cultural, socio-constructivist and experiential learning theories the pupil is understood as a person consisting of a self with a social identity and as a member of and participant in a society and culture.' The learner here is understood as a 'whole person' who is called on to construct his/her own meanings 'fostered through collaboration and social interaction' (Kohonen, 2006, p.4). Thus, developing autonomy as a psychological capacity depends on 'an internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interaction' (Little, 1996, p. 201). It is clear

that there is a strong body of opinion that argues that cognitive development and social interaction go hand in hand. In the context of language learning this implies that language proficiency can only be attained by learners making use of the target language to express their own meanings or messages that implies a social context.

### **Attitudinal Dimension**

Acceptance of responsibility for expressing one's meanings in the target language implies motivation. There is, therefore, an important attitudinal dimension to language learning. Autonomous learning necessitates learners developing a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of learning (Little, 1995, p.4; also Macaro, 1997, p.168). The inclusion of 'I can' self-assessment check-list statements in the ELP demonstrates how the ELP supports the development of self-awareness, self-confidence and a more positive attitude to language learning.

### **Critical Reflection**

Autonomy is not an absolute state (Little, 1990, p.7; Thomson, 1996, p.89), but involves the learner developing a capacity for detachment, critical reflection and decision-making (Little, 1991, p.4). This concept of capacity building is one that Macaro views as being integral to autonomous learning. He defines autonomous learning as an ability that is learned through knowing how to make decisions about the self as well as being allowed to make those decisions (Macaro 1997, p.188). This view resonates with Trim's view (1978, cited in Benson and Voller 1997, p.37): an adaptive ability allowing learners to develop supporting structures within themselves.

### **Target language Use**

Little has argued that 'The successful practice of autonomy logically entails the interaction of target language learning and target language use' (1999, p. 176). Because 'metacognition and language use are so thoroughly interdependent' (*ibid.*, p. 85) making use of the target language to construct meanings and to evaluate learning should be seen as interlinked processes. Naturally, appropriate support needs to be offered by the teacher to achieve this aim. The act of constructing meanings in the target language implies that the learner develops her metacognitive capacity. By making decisions about the content and process of learning the learner is involved in making adjustments to his current understanding of how language behaves in different social contexts. The learner's current declarative and procedural knowledge, metacognitive capacity, communicative and pragmatic strategies develop in conjunction with one another. The 'I can' self-assessment check lists in the ELP expressed in the target language support the learner in making use of the target language to reflect on their learning.

### **Autonomous Language Teaching**

I argue that in order for learners to develop as autonomous language learners and by implication, as autonomous users of the target language, it is first necessary that student-teachers develop as autonomous teachers and by implication, as autonomous users of the target language in their teaching. Nunan (1992, p. 38) has claimed that the notion of teacher as researcher of his practice is an important one in experiential learning. It involves 'a reflective awareness' of one's practice as teaching involves 'making decisions regarding the learner'. He believes that 'mutual support and cooperation' (*ibid.*, p. 38) of colleagues is an essential part of reflective teaching. According to Pollard, 'The value of engaging in reflective activity is almost always enhanced if it can be carried out in association with other colleagues' (Pollard, 2005, p.21).

Clearly, critical reflection and social interaction/collaboration have a central place in supporting autonomous language teaching just as we have found they have in autonomous language learning. By supporting student-teachers in developing greater awareness of their teaching and learning beliefs and in critically reflecting on their teaching they are supported in developing in self-awareness, and by implication, in their capacity to self-direct and to accept responsibility for improving their teaching.

### **Professional Portfolio**

Examining the tenets of the ELP inspired me to take the first steps in developing a teaching portfolio in the context of the PGDE (2003-) that was aimed at supporting more autonomous teaching and at having a more transforming role than the traditional teaching practice file that had been characterised by a collection of lesson plans<sup>5</sup>. Prior to this study it had been common practice for student teachers to observe lessons for one week in the context of a primary and a post-primary school. In the context of this study introduced the practice of student-teachers articulating their teaching and learning beliefs. They engaged in this process immediately after their school observations. I invited them to reflect on and to draw on, their observational experience as they went about articulating their teaching and learning beliefs. In addition, student-teachers were encouraged to keep a reflective journal during the PGDE. This confidential journal was aimed at supporting student-teachers in developing their capacity to make sense of their teaching experience. They could draw on taught elements of the PGDE programme as they reflected on their school experience. Below I outline the framework of the language teaching portfolio in the context of the PGDE (2003-2005).<sup>6</sup> The different parts of the professional portfolio was inspired by those contained in the ELP. My justification for this was that it would support student-teachers in engaging in a similar process with pupils in the context of the ELP/

#### **1. Passport:**

##### **a) Teaching and Learning beliefs:**

In this student-teachers articulated their beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions about language teaching and learning. By implication, this process supported student-teachers in developing their professional identity.

##### **b) Scheme of work:**

In this student-teachers articulated their teaching and learning goals and intentions, likely directions course would take, representative samples of activities, anticipated challenges and possible solutions in the context of the classes they taught<sup>7</sup>.

#### **2. Biography**

Student-teachers engaged in critical reflective writing after completing each unit/topic of teaching. Input support was offered to them about the literature on critical reflection and journal writing. A framework for writing was suggested: a) Evaluation of previous unit of teaching/learning, e.g. as a result of negotiating with learners about learning objectives and outcomes, activities, target language use, self-assessment by learners, cultural awareness, strategies, b) Goals for next unit.

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<sup>5</sup> Farren, Patrick. Ph, D thesis (2008, p.30).

<sup>6</sup> Later, as Coordinator of Professional Practice on the PGDE I had responsibility for coordinating the development of a professional portfolio for the PGDE as a whole, a process that was helped by this study.

<sup>7</sup> Perrone, Vito. (1999).

### **3. Dossier of Evidence:**

Student-teachers were expected to show sample pieces of evidence of the development of their capacity to accept responsibility for teaching and for making use of formative assessment. The pedagogical project that formed part of the PGDE modern languages' assessment process formed part of this evidence. It was aimed at supporting student-teachers in autonomous teaching. An oral-aural interview formed the other part of the PGDE assessment process, and involved student-teachers discussing their project with me as methodologist and with their target language tutor. Student-teachers were expected to show pieces of evidence that demonstrated how they had involved pupils in formative assessment and in developing their capacity to express their meanings in the target language.

A useful component in any future professional portfolio would be to have student-teachers critically reflect on the extent to which they had succeeded in achieving their goals, as well as on any transformations in their thinking, beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions.

### **A New Paradigm**

What we have said above suggests the need for a paradigm shift in the traditional understanding of language teaching. No longer can teaching be about teaching to the examination or learning be about learning off by heart teacher's knowledge in order to regurgitate it in the examination hall. What is required is that the teacher involves learners in developing the capacity to make decisions about the content and process of learning that is linked to target language use. As we have seen this can be done 'through pupil-teacher negotiation [and though the pupil's] involvement in decision-making' (Macaro, 1997, p. 168) and target language use. Kohonen (Council of Europe, 2000) has suggested that autonomous learning can be supported by pupils developing their competence in the context of three areas: (1) 'personal identity and self-direction 2) ... becoming skilled language learners and users who are also capable of evaluating their own proficiency, and (3) monitoring and reflecting on learning processes.' Little's expression 'pedagogical dialogue in the here and now' (Little, 2001, p.51) I believe succinctly encapsulates what should characterize teacher-learner relationship

### **Action Research Approach**

An action research approach was seen as appropriate in the context of examining the impact of autonomous language teaching and learning. Among the principles of action research identified by Mills (2000) are that practitioners have the decision-making authority and are committed to professional development through systematic reflection in the context of studying a concern. Frost (2002, p. 25) believes that action research relates to a process that involves 'systematic reflection, study and action carried out by individuals. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 162) define it as 'a form of self-reflective study undertaken by participants in a social situation in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understandings of these practices, and the situations in which these practices are'. Thus, for Mills (2000) and Carr and Kemmis (1986) it means that individually and collectively, members of a profession reserve the right to make autonomous and independent judgements, free from external non-professional controls and constraints, about the particular courses of action to be adopted in any particular situation. According to Elliott (1991, p. 53), a precondition for action research is 'a felt need on the part of practitioners to initiate change, to innovate'. He has argued that action research

improves practice by developing the practitioner's capacity for discrimination and judgement in particular, complex, human situations. It unifies inquiry, the improvement of performance and the development of persons in their professional role

(Elliott, 1991, p. 52.)

### **Data Collection Process**

Focus group discussions were held with educators during the course of each year of the study. Triangulation of data was achieved through semi-structured interviews with student-teachers, and responses to a questionnaire that was completed by post-primary pupils at the end of each year. Year 2 led to further clarification of themes in Year 1 and took the form of a more focused and intensive study with a smaller group of student-teachers.. In Year 2 data for educators was linked to each of the three student-teachers. In addition, in order to supplement and enrich the data for each student-teacher, the data for their particular pedagogical project and for their particular class group were linked. Sample pieces of evidence drawn from each pedagogical project were shown in the appendix of the study.

The following themes relate to autonomous language teaching formed part of the study.

- 1) Student-teachers' understanding of autonomous language teaching and learning
- 2) Interaction/collaboration between educators and student-teachers  
(*data not collected in Year 1 in context of mentors' interaction with student-teachers*)
- 3) Critical reflective writing and growth in student-teachers' metacognitive capacity  
(*data not collected in Year 1*)
- 4) Student-teachers' acceptance of responsibility for expressing their own understandings about teaching and for making use of target language in teaching
- 5) PGDE pedagogical project (*data not collected in Year 1 with mentors*)
- 6) Challenges to autonomous teaching.

### **Summary of Findings**

A brief summary of findings for years one and two of the study are given below:

#### **Year 1**

Collaboration among educators supported educators in developing a more coherent educational approach. Educators found that by reflecting on learning and teaching, pupils and student-teachers developed self-awareness and the capacity to make decisions about teaching/learning.

The process of negotiating/interacting with students enhanced learners' motivation and self-confidence. Reflecting on teaching supported student-teachers in becoming more creative and critical. Project work supported autonomous language teaching and learning. Pressure to teach towards inappropriate, external assessment posed a particular challenge to autonomous teaching, e.g. there was sometimes an expectation from mentors and from pupils that student-teachers should teach within a narrow focus. The vast majority of pupils found that the Dossier of the ELP supported them in 'keeping evidence' of their learning. This suggests that the 'I can' check-lists of the Biography linked to demonstration of evidence of achievement, supported learning.

#### **Year 2**

Collaboration between educators and student-teachers supported each of the three student-teachers in developing their capacity to reflect, self-direct, and involve pupils in the learning process. A more collaborative relationship based on mutual respect between mentor-teachers and student-teachers led to learning by each of the student-teachers and in some instances, to professional learning on the part of mentors as well. The positive impact of collaboration between mentors and student-teachers, e.g. growth in student-teachers' self-confidence, emerged more clearly in Year 2 than in Year 1. Reflective writing and work in the context of



the pedagogical project supported student-teachers in developing self-awareness and by implication, their capacity to self-direct. Reflective writing supported student-teachers in planning and in clarifying for themselves particular issues in their teaching.

The Dossier of ELP made learning more transparent to learners and supported them in being motivated and self-directed. The social dimension of learning supported learners' motivation, e.g. one student-teacher found that learners in her class enjoyed showing evidence of their learning to one another and exchanging meanings in pair-work, and in the context of a recorded dramatic production.. Supervisors reported there was enhanced use of target language over the course of the year. However, educators in general believed there was need for further examination of the potential impact on learners' language proficiency of reflecting on learning through the medium of the target language. As in Year 1, for all three student-teachers, inappropriate external State examinations were found to be a particular challenge to autonomous language teaching and learning and by implication, to use of the ELP.

### **Challenges**

The particular model of ELP developed by the Centre for language and Communication Studies, Trinity College Dublin, was found not to be user friendly. A more user friendly version needs to be created. Current forms of formal, external and terminal assessment methods posed a challenge to teachers in making use of more autonomous teaching and learning approaches. These methods need to be urgently reviewed. This is not to say of course that creative teaching and formative assessment do not take place in many schools. However, the dominance of current forms of summative assessment suggests that assessment for learning (AfL) is being put at risk. Clearly, it would be helpful for teachers in the context of continuous professional development if they were offered support in making use of more autonomous teaching and learning approaches linked to formative assessment. In the context of pre-service teacher education a challenge is for us to develop ways that support student-teachers in engaging in autonomous teaching. A professional portfolio, acting as a process tool, supports them in this process and develops their capacity to engage pupils in autonomous learning.

### **Conclusion**

The current form of formal, external and summative assessment promotes a passive and acquiescent attitude towards learning by student-teachers and learners. Student-teachers need to be supported in developing their personal and social identity if they are to support learners in engaging in this process. More formative assessment processes would support student-teachers and other teachers in this process. We cannot expect student-teachers to develop as creative and innovative practitioners if the current forms of assessment that encourages an acquiescent attitude is allowed to continue. Student-teachers and learners deserve better. The teaching learning and assessment processes need to be more coherently linked in order that student-teachers can develop their capacity to accept responsibility for their teaching linked to student-teachers engaging in dialogue with learners that is aimed at supporting learners in making use of the target language to express their own meaning. We need to move from largely outdated language teaching and learning, and assessment approaches to ones that are more geared towards supporting teachers and learners in developing their capacity to self-direct that implies being able to express their own meanings. This can be achieved by offering student-teachers and learners opportunities to demonstrate sample pieces of evidence of cognitive and metacognitive capacity development, e.g. self-assessing, that are linked to an enhanced ability and self-confidence to make use of the target language to express their own meanings in the context of topics they have had a part in selecting, and opportunities for them to demonstrate

sample pieces of evidence of engagement in oral-aural interaction in a variety of socio-cultural contexts, e.g. their experience of intercultural dialogue, and visits to the target community.

A central premise of this study has been that autonomous learning depends on autonomous teaching. In order that student-teachers develop their autonomy more systematic ongoing dialogue/collaboration between educators needs to be supported, e.g. through professional development courses. I believe that the scope of this study reaches beyond language learners. All learners need to develop their identity as persons who are knowledge creators and by implication, as persons who have the capacity to express their own meanings and to socially interact in meaningful ways.

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