

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION — A CASE STUDY IN IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

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Foreword

The reflections on autonomous learning, that emerge from the case presented here, would apply to different experiences recollected in the in-service teacher training field where I have been working for the last few years in Spanish Teacher Centres (*Centros de Profesores y Recursos*). Nevertheless, I would like to mention this specific case because I found it most representative to sustain the hypothesis that short-term extrinsic motivation plays an important role in the first steps of in-service teacher training, motivating teachers towards self-directed learning and activating autonomous learning processes and independence.

The data collected during this study and the evaluation of the final product -autonomously designed and undertaken by the group of teachers- led me to the conclusion that punctual short term extrinsic motivation is a very important factor to start any project intended to change teachers preconceptions on autonomous learning, at least in our Spanish teacher training context.

Spanish teacher training context

I would like to emphasize from the very beginning the importance of the context variables where the experience took place, because as it is widely accepted in the ethnography of education, cultural variations determine attitudes towards learning and, particularly to autonomy and self-direction in education (Benson & Voller, 1997; Marcelo, 1992; Ribé, 1994; Richards and Lockhart, 1994; Riley 1988, Saville-Troike 1982,;...).

Teachers' beliefs on learning and teaching, the current social consideration of the profession, their working conditions, the school characteristics, the demands required by the Educational Reform on professionals and the official Teacher Training guidelines, condition teachers' attitudes to teacher training.

Teachers' beliefs and professional context

The members of the group who started the project, Secondary School Teachers of English, had more than ten years of experience working in State Schools. In our Spanish context this means that they are civil servants, who attained their post through "oposiciones" (state competitive exams (French concours) to teach in post-secondary education levels in State Schools, and who will have their job until the official retirement age.

When this case study took place the Educational Reform Act (LOGSE, 1990) had been passed and the new Secondary School Curriculum was in the moment of initiation in our region. This fact originated certain signs of "anxiety" among teachers due to two important reasons:

- a. Many teachers working in Bachillerato (post-obligatory non vocational level) had now to teach in compulsory levels, because their schools had become comprehensive for students until the age of 16. This fact represented an added difficulty for those teachers used to teaching at post-compulsory levels and dealing with more gifted students.
- b. They had to start working with the new Foreign Language Curriculum, which implied new teaching aims, contents and methodology. As for the teaching guideliness offered by the educational authorities were often considered as a burden more than a help, because of abundant specialized concepts.

Because of these facts, some teachers were anxious to know how to solve the problems that their new teaching situation might present. And, in coherence with their learning and teaching beliefs, they demanded to be told how to do their work rather than discovering their own path to teaching through their own reflective practice as the Reform advices.

New F.L. Curriculum for Secondary Education

The new Secondary Education Curriculum that emerged from the Educational Act (LOGSE) shows marked differences with the previous one (1970 Educationa Act). Some of them are:

- a. Comprehensivity.
- b. Inclusion of procedural and attitudinal contents, in addition to the ordinary conceptual ones. Acquisition of learning strategies, learner autonomy and students cooperation attitudes and skills are some examples of new contents to be taught.
- c. Inclusion of crosscurricular contents, aimed at promoting moral values: equal opportunities, health education, consumerism, social and moral education, etc. have also to be taught within every school subject.
- d. The Foreign Languages syllabus includes four types of contents: Oral and Written Communication, Grammar and Language Learning Awareness and Sociocultural contents.
- e. Evaluation criteria should be formative.
- f. Methodology: coherent with the cognitivist-interactionist learning principles emanating from the LOGSE (Educational Reform).

Teacher Training

Due to the Education Reform aims and demands, the Ministry of Education recommended Teacher Training Institutions to provide teachers with adequate training, so as to be able cope with the Reform objectives.

The training offered at the Teacher Centres presented the following characteristics: free, non compulsory (but credit-getting for professional promotion) and given outside the school time-table.

Teacher Centres offered different types of teacher training activities, from 150 hour courses to conferences on special educational issues. Seminars and Work or Study Groups were other types of training.

Work Groups (or study groups) and Seminars are self-study groups of teachers who decide -often with the help of a teacher trainer- the aims of their training project, its contents, methodology, time-table, evaluation system, etc. In the case of Work Groups teachers also negotiate the final task or product with the teacher trainer, as well as the approximate amount of credits they will be awarded, according to the time dedicated to the project and the final product, though there is an official established limit of maximum 10 credits for Work Group.

The Study Group Project

Though the official teacher training requirements were first designed to promote autonomous learning and to focus training on processes rather than on products -because of the pressures to extend the Reform- the actual paradox was that teachers opted for short period courses in which they hoped to find quick recipes to solve "their specific classroom problems", and very few were really motivated to reflect upon their teaching, in order to change some teaching attitudes and to become autonomous.

Since intrinsic motivation was difficult to arouse we started to look for some sort of extrinsic short term motivation to get Seminars and Working Groups interested and involved in self-directed training and in the development of autonomy skills to be implemented in their classes.

Some Groups became engaged in projects where the final task was to develop a Teaching Unit, a school year plan for the new curriculum, a selection or a production of teaching materials, etc., I noticed that final tasks productions motivated teachers to work and develop self-directed learning.

Taking this into consideration, I invited a small group of Secondary experienced teachers (with different levels and types of training motivation) to form a Work Group to produce some specific teaching materials for an ECP project sponsored by Lingua, and of which the Foreign Language Training Department of Oviedo Teacher Centre was a member (the others were Teacher Training Institutions of Badem-Wutemberg, Strathclyde, Tolouse and Torino). This final task was a very demanding one as it was going to be seen by other European colleagues.

The objectives of the ECP were to film teaching episodes and to produce sketches of video demonstrating teaching approaches in the five different regions, so that they could be used in further teacher training.

Training goals and aims of the study group

Our training objectives and those specifically agreed by the Working Group were:

- a. to promote autonomous and cooperative learning among the members of the group.
- b. to learn about the theoretical basis and practical implications of Task-based methodology.

- c. to design a teaching unit, autonomously and according to the Foreign Language Secondary curriculum (aims, contents, methodology, evaluation...). The unit was intended to:
 - 1. raise socio-cultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding in students.
 - 2. motivate students to improve their communicative competence in English.
 - 3. encourage autonomous and co-operative learning skills in students.
- d. to put the unit into practice in their school and film the whole teaching process.
- e. to evaluate the feasibility of the unit in their school context.
- f. to evaluate their teaching role through video observation.

Methodology

The methodology accorded by the Working Group was based on autonomous learning principles and action research dynamics (Candy, 1991, Carr and Kemmis, 1988; Holec, 1988, ; Little, 1989; Schön, 1987,....)

Study of their teaching context, group decisions on methodological principles to be followed in their classrooms, bibliography readings and comments, selection of teaching materials and teaching aids, classroom observation activities, data study, group discussions, self-evaluation strategies, etc, were among the activities that filled some of the 130 hours they dedicated to this project.

My role as teacher trainer was not easy to define. In some instances I acted as an ordinary member of the group, collaborating with them in the work planned for the session; in other cases I acted mainly as a supporter and a helper who tried to make them grow in an autonomous direction. I encouraged and gave them lots of positive feedback, specially after the readings and group debates we held on the theoretical principles of the Educational Reform curriculum and new Foreign Language Syllabus contents, and when they decided to work on Task Based methodology.

Once they decided to work on Task-based methodology I handed them some readings on it. I could soon observe that these had a certain effect on their decision taking. For instance, they chose to make a didactic Unit on Halloween and a unit on that topic had already been treated for primary level in one of the articles read by the group. Nevertheless, their final product proved to be original and self-directed, as can be seen in the article where a summary of the unit was published (García Rábago et al., 1994)

The Final task

The outcomes produced by the study groups were:

- a. A Didactic Unit on Hallowe'en, with its aims, contents, timing distribution, teaching materials and activities, evaluating instruments, etc.
- b. A video production with sketches showing their group work activities, (designing the unit, comments, decision takings, evaluating their work and learning experience..) classroom performances and the final task, which consisted of a real school Hallowe'en party where students had to demonstrate their cultural and linguistic learning (they narrated Hallowe'en stories, recited specific rhymes, played party games, etc. and even gave an account of the recipes of the cakes they had made for the event!).

Evaluation of the experience

The results of the experience had come mainly from the teachers' own observation, their self-evaluation and of the process and final product and from my own observations.

Many of the following points were observed in the video in their own final self-evaluation:

- a. They became especially motivated and dedicated more time to the project than was previously planned. There were good reasons for doing that, but one of the most important was due to the fact of being part of a European project. They were eager to show their European colleagues what they were capable of.
- b. They developed positive attitudes towards self-direction in Education and some of the strategies learnt on autonomous and cooperative learning were put into practice in their classrooms, as can be seen in the videos.
- c. It was extremely rewarding for the teachers to see that they were able to produce their own teaching materials and that using them in their classes had a positive teaching and learning effect.
- d. They realized that the learning experience is only transformed through reflective observation and active experimentation.
- e. They acknowledged having achieved most of the planned training goals established for the project. Task-based methodology was valued as a very motivating approach, though they admitted that "this type of

teaching is very time-consuming and requires considerable effort on the part of the teachers".

f. They decided to continue their self-directed education the following year and, actually they worked on and produced another didactic unit following the same theoretical principles as in the previous work.

Conclusions

Though I am aware of the limitations of this case-study and that further research and longitudinal studies should be done in this field, the observation of this case proved that in our regional teacher training context the following reflexions were forthcoming:

- a. Teachers may initiate and work eagerly on a training project if there is a short term extrinsic motivating reward.
- b. They develop intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes towards autonomous learning and self-directed education when they reflect upon what and how they teach and when they become aware that they are able to work autonomously .
- c. If we want teachers to become really involved in their own training, to become autonomous and to reflect upon their teaching, theoretical input might not be the best way to start with, though once they had acquire some clear concepts and put autonomous strategies into practice, they experienced some degree of work on autonomy specialized readings on the topic, it will help them to re-evaluate their pre-concepts and to continue working in self-directed education.
- d. It is necessary to provide teachers with security and self-esteem to help them to avoid certain insecurity and "fears" to Educational Changes.
- e. To foster learners towards becoming autonomous we, trainers/teachers, must adopt a non interventionsist and humanist role, letting them be the center of their training, supplying training materials and activities and being ready to support them if necessary.
- f. Teachers who experienced self-directed training are likely to reproduce this attitude and these skills in their classrooms.

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