



Considerations on the role of teacher autonomy

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“The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realised that no knowledge is secure; that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.”

Carl Rogers, 1969

Williams and Burden, 1997: 35

Abstract

This article aims at analyzing what is involved in teacher autonomy and why it is of paramount importance to understand, develop, and experience autonomy as teachers in order to be able to guide our students in the development of autonomous behaviors as language learners and life-long learning individuals.

Key words: autonomy, autonomous behaviors, responsibility, growth, freedom, control, constraints, empowerment, changing roles.

Resumen

Este artículo intenta analizar los aspectos que hacen parte de la autonomía de los profesores y las razones por las cuales es de vital importancia entender, desarrollar y experimentar la autonomía como profesor para poder guiar a nuestros estudiantes en el desarrollo de conductas autónomas como aprendices de lenguas y como aprendices para la vida.

Palabras claves: autonomía, conductas autónomas, responsabilidad, crecimiento, libertad, control, restricciones, ‘empoderamiento’, cambio de roles.

1. Towards a definition of autonomy

The last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the promotion of autonomous behaviors in the field of education. Although some forms of autonomy, more clearly described as self-learning, had had an important role in language learning in non-formal educational contexts since the mid-seventies (see Benson and Voller, (1997); Benson (2001), Finch (2001) for discussions on this), the emphasis now is on promoting the development of autonomous behaviors inside the school or educational context, as an accompaniment to formal educational processes. The idea is to make students life-long learners, ready to face the challenges of modern life and to continue learning beyond formal education. The following definitions represent these latest views of autonomy.

Allwright (1990:12) viewed autonomy as “...a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence”; this definition emphasizes change, together with the key concepts of self-development, which represents our own efforts in the process, and human interdependence, to dismiss the earlier concept of autonomy as individualistic behavior.

Littlewood's definition (1997:428)

We can define an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out choices which govern his or her actions.

This capacity depends on two main components : ability and willingness ...

incorporates the ideas of choice, capacity for change and drive as important elements in the make-up of autonomous behaviors.

There are many other views of this concept, but we would argue that the main components of autonomy in any field are responsibility for analyzing possibilities, making choices and effecting changes in one's life and activities, involving both independent and collaborative action.

Autonomy has different and countless manifestations in different cultures (Benson, 1995; Aoki and Smith, 1999; Little, 1999; Aoki, 2001) ; there is also a time dimension to it, for, as societies evolve and modernize, there are changes in communications, interactions and other domains of life that definitely shape



our needs, our ways of relating to others, the implications of the actions we undertake and the choices we make.

Several researchers on this topic have made their contributions in an effort to understand the make-up of autonomy. They have stressed the following aspects:

- Autonomy is not an “all-or-nothing” concept; it can be developed and may be present in some aspects of a person’s life and absent from others. Individuals may be autonomous in different degrees, and age and maturity seem to have an influence in it.
- Responsibility, awareness of one’s needs, motivation, critical reflection, self-evaluation and some level of freedom are necessary elements in autonomy.
- In language learning, the level of language proficiency seems to be linked to the presence and degree of achievable autonomy; likewise, the use of learning strategies which are effective for a given individual are also important.
- Autonomy does not mean that teachers completely transfer all control and decisions to learners. Learners need of teacher collaboration to gain some levels of autonomy.
- Learner autonomy is concomitant to teacher autonomy.

The view of autonomy I refer to in this article is divorced from the early concept that equated it to learning without the mediation of teachers and the more recent one that is based on the use of the latest technological resources to the exclusion of personal contact (Holec 1980, 1981; Dickinson 1987, among others) and definitely identifies with more critical contemporary concepts (Allright 1990; Pemberton et al 1996; Pennycook 1997 and Little 2000) that emphasize responsibility, self-direction, collaboration, participation, cultural and political concerns. This view takes into account human feelings, rationality, responsible action and values, put together to consolidate a given attitude towards life.

2. Why is autonomy desirable in language learning

The last four decades in language teaching have been mainly characterized by the emphasis on and prevalence of student-centeredness and communicative approaches in which students develop competence in languages to fulfill both



personal and social roles. Languages are learned to meet people's needs and intentions, and for self-expression and communication in a social medium.

Classrooms have a varied sample of students and no teacher, course or institution can give students all the skills and knowledge they need for life. Teachers usually have a syllabus to implement, according to the aims and objectives of the institution and to the official syllabus –or, in our case, to the PEI¹. As a result, it is not always easy to cater to all students; this may happen for a number of reasons which involve not only differences in interests and motivation, but also different learning paces and styles.

This situation calls for autonomous work on the part of students, in order to complement classroom work with input, materials and opportunities for interaction, to process language and to self-regulate their learning. In this scenario, it is obvious that processes that help increase aspects of great importance in language learning such as self-awareness, self-assessment, motivation, risk-taking in verbal interaction, seizing opportunities and taking responsibility for one's own learning, will be appropriate (see Gardner, 1985; Crookes & Schmidt, 1989; Bachman & Palmer 1989; Oscarson, 1989; Dam & Legenhausen, 1999; Zimmerman, B. 2000; Arias & Maturana, 2005). Little (1997:99) expresses that

Autonomy in language learning is not merely a matter of control over learning activities and resources. It is also a matter of a particular orientation towards language learning, in which 'for the truly autonomous learner, each occasion of language use is an occasion of language learning, and *vice versa*'.

The promotion of autonomy in language learning seeks to provide opportunities to enhance students' processes through the use of individual, group and academic skills such as language learning strategies, awareness of learning styles, self - assessment, self-regulation of activities, self-monitoring, planning and working with others, reflecting on their learning, doing independent and extra work when necessary, making contributions to the planning and development of syllabi, to class development and to the gathering of materials, etc. It should be said that although research about the links between the communicative approach and the development of autonomy, as well as the role

1 PEI stands for Proyecto Educativo Institucional, a plan each educational institution has to show its direction and guide its actions.



of autonomy in language learning in general has been carried out in different cultural settings (Dam & Legenhausen, 1999; Cohen, 1999; Nunan & Keobke, 1999; Dam, 2000; Champagne et al, 2001, among others) there is still the need to offer stronger, more sustained and coherent empirical evidence about the way it works. The relationship between autonomy and language learning, however, is valid when we think of the opportunities to learn that autonomous students may seek and find and how much they may enhance their learning.

The adoption and fostering of autonomy in language learning curricula, however, need to go beyond the classroom and the students' individual and group processes. They should lead to broader considerations on the reasons for and the implications of the promotion of autonomy. Language learning purposes are not only individual; they are also cultural and political. Although we recognize the benefits of the promotion and the exercise of autonomy, this should not lead us to the neglect of values that are so important in all societies at all times, such as the role and place of teachers, the richness of learning in contact, which leads to the exercise of solidarity, the respect of cultural differences, and the search for equality and social justice, which have been the main motivation of some of the advocates of autonomy (Illich, 1971; Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 1990 and 1994; Little, 1997a, and Benson, 1997, among others). Nor should it contribute to nourish a growing institutional trend that fosters autonomous behaviors, usually in the form of massive use of technology, with the goal of making budgetary reductions. A manifestation of this is the wave of distance programs to serve not only those who cannot be present, but all kinds of learners, serving many learners with little investment and reducing or suppressing contact with teachers and other learners. This may be a way of shunning institutional responsibility, shifting the load of elements that are of social and national/governmental responsibility to the individual. As Benson (2001:20) puts it: "Meeting individual needs should not become a matter of dispersing learning communities and privileging those who possess 'learning capital' over those who do not."

3. Teacher autonomy

Together with the recent view of autonomy there has been an emphasis on teacher autonomy; it is only natural to think that autonomous behaviors promoted in students have to be present in ourselves. We also need to be life-



long learners and to face an ever changing society. As Smith (2000:90) has pointed out,

“One leitmotiv of recent work in the field of teacher education is that learning constitutes an important part not only of becoming, but also of continuing to be a teacher. If this is the case, then learner autonomy is likely to be as necessary for ourselves as we consider it to be for language students.”

The concept of teacher autonomy is of recent interest but not of recent existence. It has been around for as long as the concept of learner autonomy has been studied; although an interrelation between the two has been established, the reflections and work concentrated on the role of teachers in the development of students' autonomy and was not expanded or explored beyond that point. However, that has recently changed and the last international conferences on the topic of autonomy (Nottingham, 1998, AILA 1999 in Tokyo, Helsinki 2000, Hong Kong 2000, Shizuoka 2001, Edinburgh 2001, Singapore 2002, among others) have been partly or totally devoted to teacher autonomy.

The definition of teacher autonomy has been subject to discussions and they reflect, more than the evolution over time, different points of view of those who offer them. For some authors it refers to “the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning” (Thavenius, in Cotterall and Crabbe 1999 : 160) According to this definition teachers reflect on their role and find ways to change it to adapt to the new students' roles, to help them on their way to autonomy and independence. There is a clear link between the two types of autonomy, but the greater emphasis is placed on students because teacher autonomy is achieved through their change.

Benson (2000:101) discussed a view of autonomy which may be one of the most popular: the right to freedom from control by others; it is, nevertheless, one of the most difficult to attain. It emphasizes choice as an important element in our lives. It is highly desirable for many teachers to think of themselves as autonomous professionals, free from control exerted by colleagues, administrators, the institution or the educational system and able to decide and take action on their own. Reality shows a different picture: teachers are restricted by contracts, administrators, school regulations, curricula and students' desires demands and expectations.



Little, (1995:178) defines teacher autonomy as their ‘capacity to engage in self-directed teaching or professional action’. This view includes “...having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercised via continuous reflection and analysis... affective and cognitive control of the teaching process”. What is involved in this definition begins to approach us to sharing responsibility through our actions and involvement. Still, teacher autonomy depends on how we do our teaching job.

Finally, there is the concept of the autonomous teacher as an autonomous learner, with the capacity for self-directed professional development. In this concept of autonomy teachers are aware of the reason, the time, the place and the way they can acquire pedagogical skills and updated knowledge as part of their teaching practice (Tort-Moloney, 1997, Smith, 2000). This concept of autonomy focuses on the teachers’ responsibility to be always ready to do their job and grow professionally and not on their duty to make students more autonomous. There is no shift of responsibility for our autonomy as teachers.

Of all these definitions and ideas of autonomy, I identify with that of the autonomous teacher as a person with capacity for self- directed teacher-learning or for professional development, because it concentrates on our growth as human beings and permanent learners, one of the main requirements of today’s society and one of the main sources of personal and professional satisfaction.

Little 2000 (in Smith 2001:7) establishes the connection between teacher and student autonomy when he remarks that “It is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner.”

As there is not total agreement on a definition of teacher autonomy, there have been collective efforts to characterize it. After the 2001 Conference in Shizuoka, Japan, a group of language teachers (Barfield, Aswell, Carroll, Collins, Cowie, Critchley, Head, Nix, Obermeier and Robertson) set up an on-line collaborative discussion of the term. Their effort produced the following reflections, characteristics and suggested behaviors:

- Teacher autonomy involves negotiation skills, capacity for reflection on the teaching process and the teaching environment, readiness to



engage in lifelong learning to the best of their capacity, commitment to promoting learner autonomy through the creation of a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted. It should not exclude the presence of the traditional teaching skills.

- Teacher autonomy seems to be very closely bound up with the notions of the critically reflective teacher, teacher researcher and action research. The basic premise here is that teachers are best placed to develop their own teaching in order to better the learning experiences of their students.
- Autonomous teachers should have good institutional knowledge in order to start to address effectively constraints on teaching and learning; they should also be willing to confront institutional barriers in socially appropriate ways, to turn constraints into opportunities for change. However, they should be aware that neither teacher, nor student autonomy mean freedom from all constraints.
- Autonomy is developed through observation, reflection, thoughtful consideration, understanding, experience, evaluation of alternative. The absence of coercion does not automatically result in autonomy, nor is choice always autonomous.

4. How teachers view their own autonomy

How teachers interpret their autonomy is, many times, closely connected to their own learning experiences. Many of us did not experience the opportunity to learn autonomously and, consequently, find it hard to promote autonomy because it is difficult for us to be “true believers” in something we were not given to taste.

In my experience as teacher educator, when asked about a definition of the autonomous teacher, teachers immediately refer to their incidence in the development of their students’ autonomy. Nonetheless, when asked about specific aspects of the promotion of student autonomy such as power balance (sharing decision making, changing aspects of our teaching as a result of students’ suggestions, allowing students to take control of some activities in class), reflective practices (having regular reflective sessions, using self and peer evaluation) or strategy awareness (finding out or using strategy instruction), their answers usually reflect no change in their practices.



Change, if we are not sure that want it, is a struggle because it involves effort, abandoning the security of what we know and, many times, confronting others. This is what a survey (September 2004) to a group of fifteen graduate students who teach at the primary, secondary and tertiary level showed. Comments such as: “There is no power balance. I have the power. Basically, I am the authority in the classroom”; “I am afraid I am doing nothing to encourage my students’ initiatives”; or “I very rarely change my teaching based on my students’ suggestions” are of common occurrence. They come from teachers of all levels and reveal that even the type of teacher autonomy based on the promotion of students’ autonomy is not very popular among many of us.

In the context of Colombian universities, twenty teachers who work at six different institutions surveyed in 2003 described the autonomous teacher as someone who exhibits the list of characteristics presented below. I have classified them according to the main views of teacher autonomy discussed in the previous section.

Some colleagues said that the autonomous teacher is free to make his pedagogical decisions, decides what and how to do his work, takes initiatives, makes proposals and implements them. This group of characteristics corresponds to the concepts of autonomy as freedom from control by others, advocated by Benson, (2000.)

Other university teachers expressed that the autonomous teacher is well-informed about approaches, methods, trends, etc. in her field and makes informed decisions, keeps herself updated and has professional identity. This second set of characteristics seems to go well with autonomy as the capacity for self-directed professional development put forward by Little in 1995.

A third group of behaviors present in autonomous teachers include facilitating the empowerment of the students, determining their needs, using and fostering self-evaluation and reflection, evaluating the students honestly, promoting research among them, looking for possibilities to facilitate the development of their skills and promoting trust and autonomy. This set matches the concept of the autonomous teacher as someone who has the ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning (Thavenius, in Cotteral and Crabbe, 1999).

Finally, some colleagues said that the autonomous teacher is responsible, innovative, creative and interacts with other teachers. Although this last set of



characteristics does not necessarily match the definition of the autonomous teacher as someone who has the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning her own teaching (Tort-Moloney, 1997, Smith, 2000), it is the closest approximation to a teacher with the characteristics we expect to find in proactive autonomous students.

It becomes evident that most of the autonomous characteristics the twenty university teachers surveyed see in themselves or in their colleagues still fall into the third group (Thavenius, in Cotteral and Crabbe, 1999), establishing a clear link between teacher and student autonomy, but somehow not fully addressing the issue of their own responsibility as permanent learners, even though they may be excellent teachers.

5. Constraints to teacher autonomy

The search for the development and exercise of teacher autonomy encounters many handicaps. A first source of constraints is fear of change, a powerful one because to do things in a familiar way is safer than to navigate in new, unknown waters. Another strong handicap to teacher autonomy is the fear to release control, to let go. Not to be in charge of all details anymore may be very frustrating and the empowerment of students through the exercise of power balance in the classroom is something many of us are not ready to foster. A third source of constraints we all experience comes from educational authorities, governmental or organizational institutions that have as their goal the regulation of teachers' actions. They are present both in public and private institutions and take the form of policies, regulations, reforms, demands, pressures from state mandated testing, standardized practices, etc. At the school level, curricula, administrator's demands, PEIs, differences with colleagues with whom we have to coordinate activities, and even the need to please parents, students, other teachers, and the community in general may seem to work against teacher autonomy and sometimes they do. Another important fact in institutional constraints is that demands may be too many, too high, they may come too often, leaving little room for teachers' critical analysis, adaptation and preparation. Teachers are then turned into "hard workers", always "on the go", but with very little time for professional exploration and growth.

A fourth, and not less important source of constraints, is within ourselves: our attitude may be a great handicap. Our resistance to invest time, effort and



money in our personal and professional development and growth is, at times, the reason why we prefer to be followers and not to lead, the reason why we depend on our old practices, experiences, materials and habits instead of trying new things, even after we have had the evidence that they could improve our work and our students' learning. A negative attitude is, many times, what keeps us behind in terms of advances, innovations, of our own knowledge and skills and even in the career ladder. It is not the case of being enthusiastic and uncritical consumers of all new trends, but we could be proactive, take time to analyze new proposals in the light of our own situation and incorporate them to our practice if they are of interest and convenience to ourselves and our community. In the next section some ways of working against these constraints will be mentioned.

6. Ways to develop teacher autonomy

Apart from the recognition of how important autonomous behaviors may be in our lives and our teaching, and of the empowerment and satisfaction that derive from their development and exercise, we all need, as Littlewood (1997) stated, ability and willingness to implement changes in our behavior in order to become more autonomous. Six important elements in implementing change may be the following:

1. Self awareness leads us to a better understanding of ourselves as learners and professionals, of our strengths and weaknesses. Self-evaluation and reflection are excellent tools in getting to know ourselves and a diary is of great value to record the process.

2. Awareness of what happens around us, to our students, at the work place, in our community, in our country and in the world. Through awareness we are better able to identify our students' needs, goals, capabilities, desires, changes and dreams, so we can help them develop autonomy and their own awareness of their learning processes. Besides, we can make better contributions to the achievement of standards and to a better positioning of our institution. Through awareness we can also be proactive, critical, and put forward ideas that contribute to the betterment of our working conditions and of the teaching field. Observation and monitoring are a must in the development of awareness, as well as a critical standpoint in front of events.

3. Responsibility, a quality without which autonomy is not possible, gives us freedom and empowerment; at the same time it demands dedication,



organization, time management skills, investment, stamina, perseverance and commitment to tasks and projects.

4. Challenges take us a step forward and show us the scope of our capabilities. They lead us to professional growth. Challenges may take the form of exploration into new areas, of decisions to improve notoriously an area of our knowledge or skills or to undertake research, etc.

5. Participation and collaboration are also key elements to the development of autonomy. In our profession, more than in some others, growing together, constructing collectively and undertaking projects, innovations and enterprises is of paramount importance. Autonomy does not mean isolation, individualism or self-sufficiency. Negotiation, cooperation, sharing, promoting, listening and respecting others and their views are essential components of participation and collaboration.

6. Changing roles means transforming our role in the classroom, in the degree that our convictions allow it (radical changes or moderate ones), from controller to advisor, from instructor to guide, from transmitter to observer and listener, from evaluator and judge to researcher. Transforming our role in the classroom is concomitant with the transformation of our students' roles.

At this point, I would go back to the conditions expressed by Littlewood (1997), in his definition of autonomy. He claims that *ability* and *willingness* are essential elements in the making of an autonomous person; in the case of the autonomous teacher, they represent the capability and the drive to develop autonomously and guide his students on the road to autonomy. A good point of departure is the analysis of our knowledge, skills, teaching situation and of our students' learning conditions. These questions, proposed by Thavenius, (1999: 161) may be a good start:

- What do I do to reconsider my teacher role?
- What do I do for my students that they can and should do themselves?
- What do I do to encourage independence and responsibility?
- What do I do to help my students understand their learning processes and strategies?

I would add these questions:

- How good am I at what I do?



- How can I be better and do a better job?
- What has worked out for me in my learning processes? Would it help my students?
- Which goals will I set for myself on my way to developing autonomy and allowing its development in my students?

Support groups would also be very helpful to discuss, understand and advise on decision making. We shall not forget that autonomy is a gradual process; personal changes and, even more, group changes may take a long time.

We may try some of these the actions and attitudes to develop our own autonomy:

- Learn a new language. This would take us back to where many of our students are and will help us to understand them better.
- Plan a trip to a foreign country to refresh our language knowledge and use.
- Update. Make the decision of signing up for courses that interest us be it in our field or not.
- Offer new, interesting courses which would freshen-up our students' options and broaden our horizons.
- Be ready to undergo retraining, if necessary.
- Take up the direction of theses and monographs, if we have not tried it. This is a good source of new learning and skills development for both, the student and ourselves.
- Keep a diary and ask our students to do the same. It is one of the best ways to develop consciousness and appreciation of what happens and how it affects us. It also helps us to release emotions, work on our personal dilemma, facilitate introspection, which in turn promotes personal and intellectual development.
- Work on our time management and plan carefully all those activities in which our students' time and ours are interwoven.
- If we teach to future language teachers or are in charge of teacher development programs, recognize and emphasize the importance of teacher autonomy.



- Include autonomous learning in our possibilities of research.
- Use a language learning portfolio in class (Little 2000) in which our students and ourselves can include a passport (linguistic identity and assessment of our language proficiency), a biography (our histories as language learners and teachers, our targets, progress and intercultural experiences) and a dossier (a selection of our best pieces of work). This would allow us to keep track of our progress and our students', to analyze our work and the way our students respond to it and to plan actions to make the necessary changes.

7. How autonomy contributes to our personal and professional life

For some of us who have explored the concept of autonomy, discovered its benefits and drawback, weighed them and decided to be its advocates, the contributions of autonomy to our lives and to our job are evident. Nonetheless, it is necessary to highlight the possibilities of change that the development and exercise of autonomy can bring us.

On the personal side, one of the main gains from autonomy is improvement in what we do and how we do it. As we accept that being autonomous teachers means also being constant learners, we reflect on our job and preparation, we self-evaluate, plan, carry out and assess actions that represent the betterment of our preparation and the increase of our body of knowledge. Autonomy enhances our metacognitive capacity and provides us with the tools for “a **strategic engagement with learning.**” (Breen and Mann, in Benson and Voller 1997: 134-136) Concomitant to this is the development of a sense of security, a “**robust sense of self**” (Ibid) which reinforces our appreciation of who we are as professionals. As in a chain reaction, being self-assured and appreciating what we do contribute to an appreciation of the teaching field and to the undertaking of actions that improve the image of the profession. All this means professional development.

On the social side, autonomy in collaboration represents organized, well-developed plans, actions being carried out in groups and with responsibility. This is another contribution to the teaching profession, to the institutions we work for and to the growth of groups who put together their efforts to change situations in their daily life as teachers. Collaboration involves not only working



with colleagues and administrators, but also working with students to achieve common goals and to help them to be proactive. Proactive language learners use every opportunity they have to learn and, consequently, have better chances of achieving high level communication and intercultural skills.

The development of autonomous behaviors gives us what Breen and Mann (1997: 134) call **a stance**, “a position from which to engage with the world, a way of being in it”, which makes us feel in control of our engagements and helps us to learn different things in different areas of knowledge and to carry ourselves with a different, more positive attitude through life.

Teacher education programs need to start recognizing the responsibility of preparing their students in the area of autonomy. They could introduce activities, courses and methodological practices to give students the opportunity to experience autonomy as learners so that they can implement it as teachers. Besides, they need to contribute to develop in the students positive attitudes towards self-regulated, independent and continuous learning.

8. Teachers' contribution to student's autonomy

It is essential that students are given opportunities to experience autonomy so they can develop and exercise it beyond formal learning circumstances. In this respect, our autonomy and our students' are interwoven. Apart from the main condition, which is for us to develop as autonomous teachers, there are some attitudes and actions we may adopt and undertake to contribute to our students autonomy. Teachers can select, among them, those that fit their specific context:

- Create new spaces and tasks to provide students with opportunities for the development of autonomy.
- Provide constant opportunities for conscious reflection on classroom and out-of the classroom tasks.
- Provide spaces for students' personal expression and decision making.
- Provide as much guidance as required. Some students are not ready for or interested in embracing autonomous work.
- Discover autonomous students and try to make them influence others, through project work, tasks and other types of group work where they would interact.



- Provide opportunities for self-assessment, peer-correction and feedback, not as isolated happenings, but as integral parts of evaluation processes.
- Carry out strategy instruction, after determining what their students have, what they need and what works out for them. Individual differences should be considered.
- Raise awareness about facts in language acquisition through reflection and discussion.
- Raise awareness about what it means to be an autonomous student.
- Create opportunities to discuss theories, ideologies and beliefs, models of society, models of education and their relations and implications.
- Respect students' opinions and ask them to justify or give evidence for the positions they adopt, to help them foresee the possible consequences.
- Reflect constantly upon the importance of doing extra work.
- Give students responsibility of some class activities.
- Take into account students' constructive criticism and initiative.
- Trust in students' capabilities.
- Give positive feedback.
- Give example of autonomy.

9. Conclusions

This article has been an effort to explore the concept of teacher autonomy, from the perspective of theoreticians, from our teachers' perspectives and from my experience as a teacher educator. I have stressed the view that developing autonomy as a teacher goes beyond individual freedom from control by others and acting and advancing in isolation. Becoming autonomous teachers has to do with our commitment to explore, change and grow, but this only makes sense if it contributes to the growth and to the achievement of community goals. There is no doubt that the concept of autonomy has a controversial nature; yet, it is a desirable goal of human development throughout our life span, not exclusively bound to academic situations, but relevant in our efforts



to keep up and be a part of what shapes our personal, professional, regional and global culture. Also, although a good deal of independence is required for autonomy, it does not exclude collaborative work and interaction.

On the whole, there is need for more research projects that explore, establish, and analyze the convenience, benefits, and multiple manifestations of both teacher and student autonomy; this can be done through action research that involves teachers and students alike, keeping in mind the three critical principles of action in the development of autonomy proposed Barfield et al (2001) members of the Shizuoka group: critical reflective inquiry, empowerment and dialogue.

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