

Constructing Learner Autonomy Through Control Shift: Sociocultural Implications of Teacher Cognition and Practice in a Chinese Secondary School

Abstract

Recognised as an educationally desirable goal, the development of learner autonomy (LA) has been extensively implemented and researched in various settings. Many have advocated that the goal can be achieved in a conventional school environment through control shifts from school managers to teachers and from teachers to students. However, few empirical studies have closely examined the actual practices of managers and teachers in this regard, and their perceptions on their own practices as well as the nature of autonomy. This is the research gap that stimulated the current study to seek to explore ways in which learner autonomy might be developed through the shift of control between school administrators, teachers, and students.

The study was conducted in the context of EFL instruction in a Chinese private secondary school, where LA was being promoted through a school-based curricular innovation. The participants comprised the school principal, the executive director, and all nine English Department teachers, which constituted an institutional case study, as well as individual cases. The overriding research question was: How might the findings of the present study contribute to a refined academic understanding of the role of control shift in the development of learner autonomy? To address this issue, four subsidiary questions were formulated: How was learner autonomy interpreted in a Chinese secondary school? In what ways was learner autonomy developed through control shifts in the school? In what ways did the administrators' and the teachers' beliefs converge with or diverge from their practices? How should the convergences and divergences be explained in the wider sociocultural context?

Taking an interpretive naturalistic paradigm, the study deployed a multi-method approach to data collection, conducted over an academic semester of five months. Data gathered included twenty-two classroom observations, sixteen post-lesson discussion sessions, eleven interviews, and numerous field and reflective notes, school documents and classroom materials. The collected data were subjected to a process of grounded analysis, through which important themes were identified by open and axial coding, constant comparison and contrast, and iterative checking.

The findings revealed a great diversity in both the teachers' practice and their cognition with respect to fostering LA through the transfer of control to students. Both practice and cognition could be viewed as points along parallel continua. One end of the practice continuum showed signs of comprehensive control release to students genuinely supporting LA, while the other displayed evidence of false control relinquishment, merely "paying lip service" to LA development. Similarly, in the cognitive dimension, one extreme suggested a teacher's deep understanding of the nature of LA and explicit awareness of her LA-oriented practice, whereas the other

exposed another teacher's ill-defined interpretation of LA and unawareness of how her actions constrained learner autonomy. With numerous episodes at different points of the continua and changing over time, the teachers' practice and cognition exhibited a complex and dynamic range of convergences and divergences. Such complex and dynamic convergences and divergences were also reflected in the guidelines that the school managers provided for the teachers and the actual measures they took in relation to the promotion of LA in the school. Among the many factors that affected the implementation of LA development in the given context, three prominent ones were: the administrators' and the teachers' understanding of the meaning of LA; their beliefs and trust in learners' ability to take control; and their awareness of the LA-facilitating or hindering nature of the actions that they took in this regard.

The study concludes that Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Cole & Engeström, 1993) is conducive to illuminating the complexity and dynamics of the LA-oriented practice and cognition in the school. Although the findings of such a case study cannot be generalised to other contexts, the study makes an original contribution to comprehending the promotion of LA in Chinese secondary schools. In addition, it offers practical implications for researchers, policy makers, school administrators and teachers who are interested in and committed to adopting LA as a worthwhile educational goal.