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Teacher Autonomy: How Far and to What Extent in ESL Classroom?

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Abstract:

Teacher autonomy is a taboo topic in most private institutions in India. Discipline in the classroom is an absolute necessity. But managements understand discipline as passive listening which is not appropriate for an English classroom. So what should the English teachers do? In this paper I focus on these issues and suggest some practical solutions. Can an English teachers' association be one of the solutions? How can the English teachers convince managements that a lot of autonomy should be given for them to carry out the recent techniques? Can the English teachers do that effectively? This article also suggests that videotaping of classes and observations by peers is necessary. Feedback from previous students gives an accurate reflection. Finally this article recommends that the teachers should have a real clarity of thought on issues like usage of the latest technologies like Internet, mobile phones etc. Most importantly the teachers should have the confidence to convince senior professors of the effectiveness of this approach in this 'Age of Globalization'.

Keywords: Teacher autonomy, peer observation, feedback, management support

1. Introduction

In the technical terminology of English Language Teaching the term 'Teacher Autonomy' (TA) has many connotations. In many schools and colleges the teacher has to function under certain clear guidelines. One of the most important things is 'discipline' in the classroom in the sense of not only classroom management but definitely should look and be like a very serious class. The main drawback of our system is lack of spoken English skills resulting in lack of fluency and confidence and thereby reducing the chances of students getting good jobs. But for that, students should talk in English regularly and fluently in the classroom and in this context the teacher has no autonomy except to maintain strict discipline. If teacher encourages students to talk in English the classroom will be somewhat noisy. In this paper I concentrate on the autonomy issue for the inexperienced teachers. What the teachers are taught in teacher training classes is not always applicable especially in private schools or colleges.

1.1. Role of the Teachers

Spoken English is not given importance in the classrooms in India because that skill is not tested in terms of marks and grades during final exams. So, in this extremely competitive and also daily mechanical routine of the private schools or colleges autonomy for the English teacher is a luxury which cannot be afforded either by the teacher as he/she has to complete the syllabus or by the managements as they have to advertise that their schools or colleges get more marks and ranks. But recent theoretical approaches like Communicative Language Teaching focus on group division and communication among students in the classroom. In these circumstances the class looks somewhat noisy and mismanaged in the sense that it does not look like a serious and silent class for an observer especially for higher authorities like principal etc. So what should the new English teachers do? He should of course take advice from seniors but usually other teachers do not take these matters seriously. Everybody survives on their own styles and they advise the same for the new teachers. The western language theories are meant for small classes of around 25 students but in India a classroom usually consists of around 60 students or even more. Can an English teachers' association be the solution? It is highly unlikely as there cannot be different rules for only one subject in the same institution.

There is another dimension to this issue. Teacher Autonomy (TA) necessarily means Learner Autonomy (LA) also at least to some controlled extent. Erdogan and Smith (2008) assert that unless and until teachers are autonomous they cannot make their learners self dependent. Autonomy gives rise to motivation to be creative and it in turn makes both the teachers and the learners confident and enthusiastic and will have a positive influence which facilitates better and quick language learning. In this paper I emphasize that the biggest problem for teacher autonomy is the attitude of seniors. Most senior traditional teachers look at teacher autonomy with suspicion because they think that the class will not be focused and serious and therefore students take the English class casually. But recent research in the west proved that it is wrong. But what about the special Indian conditions where large classrooms and the attitude of managements, seniors and even general society has a notion that classroom must be not only serious and silent but should also look and be serious and silent.

1.2. Reflectivity Aspect in Autonomy

First of all the teachers should have a clear cut idea on what autonomy means to oneself. The teachers should be confident that she should be able to control the students in such a way that even senior administrators / teachers should be convinced. This necessarily means that the activities or tasks of the teachers should be in such a way that he should confidently tell / show the seniors that his approach and attitude is correct. A group of English teachers having such similar attitudes would be the ideal solution. Paradoxically, despite having at four or five All India level teacher associations and their local chapters nobody seems to have taken this issue seriously. R. Smith (2003) gives a thoroughly detailed account of the term 'teacher autonomy.' Apart from several clarifications he gives importance to three main dimensions.

1. Self-directed Professional action
2. Capacity for it
3. Freedom from control.

He says that even these terms don't have much clarity. He says there are several implications of using teacher autonomy in the classroom as it should necessarily prepare teachers to encourage learners' autonomy. There can also be an orientation towards action research where the teacher can prove that "freedom" from several received notions of a traditional classroom can make student learner autonomy natural, correct and comfortable. Can the inexperienced teachers do that properly? One of the main reasons is that this issue is not dealt with seriously in teacher training programmes. He finally stresses the importance of reflective teaching in the entire process of teacher autonomy, so that administrators have trust and faith in the abilities of teacher to use such 'autonomy' productively. Teachers need to generate such faith. Although in private, many teachers acknowledge the intrinsic relevance of teacher autonomy, in practice they follow the safe and time tested conservative approaches.

Can the teachers really stimulate students with this freedom? This aspect of making the students realize what their goals are should be ultimate aim of such an approach. Feedback from former students is an effective tool to check the usefulness of such a way. Such new methods should not degenerate into just fashionable concepts but must be taken seriously with the supportive network needed from all the stakeholders along with an effective use of latest technologies like Internet. Video taping of classes and the resultant self-observation are among the activities also necessary. Peer-observation is another absolutely necessary activity which will make it a collaborative process rather than an isolated attempt.

1.3. Issues in Mixed Ability Classroom

Another important dimension within teacher autonomy which is a perennial problem even for senior teacher is the mixed ability classroom. In a normal highly disciplinary classroom this is not a major problem but in an innovative approach like teacher autonomy influenced classroom this is a major problem especially for an inexperienced teachers who are given heavy theoretical training in institutes like EFLU, CILL, RIEs etc, where the major emphasis is on metropolitan areas where most of the students are quite competent in at least middle level / intermediate level English. Therefore teachers should have a kind of a portfolio (an advanced kind of lesson plan) or an e-portfolio to cater to these needs. Materials downloaded from Internet and other sources play an important role so that the teacher can individually give different materials for different students based on their abilities. It should be remembered most importantly that the goals / tasks for the same classroom / semester and syllabus must be the same even for the mixed ability classroom. So the teacher needs a lot of preparation and infrastructural support in every way including managements to be successful. At every stage of this process group leaders / associate group leaders should observe the activities and progress. Difficulties and other problems should be reported to the teachers and the teachers in turn should closely monitor, coordinate, advise and give any other help required for these mixed ability students.

Teacher diaries or logs are also useful for the teachers to monitor their own progress. Every teacher is always a learner provided she/he show the inclination and intensity necessary for teaching. Students are also advised to keep track of their own progress. Initially they need training in these issues and gradually they will become used to it and by the time they complete B.Tech and other such professional courses they become quite used to it. These logs both for teachers and learners are effective because a written record is permanent whereas to remember only the spoken aspects many finer nuances and specific details in this age of busy schedules it is not so easy. In this way creative ideas might also emerge. Interactions with teachers of similar inclination are also useful. Such interactions will modify their pre-conceived notions regarding assumptions about teacher autonomy which is a big responsibility because of the many dimensions including the close examination by senior administrators because of the novel concept of teaching methods.

2. Conclusion

Senior students after completing their graduation or post graduation and want to become teachers will compulsory have to undergo a teacher training program like B.Ed. In such programmes they have a dual role of both 'would be teachers' and senior students learning the techniques. Enyedi (2007) beautifully conceptualizes their condition to that with a metaphor like a student 'turning from a caterpillar to a butterfly'. It is in this transition phase that the teachers should decide on the most important points which will shape his/her career.

1. Should they become an Autonomous Teachers, regular, conservative and routine teacher?
2. How far and to what extent should they request / convince the senior teachers / administrations for their autonomy?
3. If the resources are limited and only partial autonomy is given what are the alternatives and innovative ideas that they think of and implement.

4. They should have a clear cut clarity of thought regarding their not only their goals and ambitions but also that of the students, other stake holders and finally the managements.
5. Effective use of latest technologies like Internet, smart phones and the kind of limited freedom given to the learners only for this purposes. In this electronic age students are very smart so, can she ensure that they don't misuse these technologies.
6. Blogs, chatting, Skype are other such resources which can be used in an excellent manner provided managements give permission and the students do not misuse them. Can the teacher ensure this to the satisfaction of the seniors and managements and the amount of seriousness required.
7. If he/she can do all these things in a satisfactory manner then teacher autonomy must be given to the extent desired by the individual teachers.
8. Peer observation and analysis should be the key factor in all these issues. Then what about petty issues for administrators but serious issues for English teachers like professional jealousy, criticism in not a constructive manner but for the sake of ego satisfaction etc.? These are some of the routine but very crucial issues to be resolved.

Finally an autonomous and relaxed, confident teacher will resonate these same positive vibrations not only to learners but also to their colleagues and this facilitates quick, better and effective teacher-learning process to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders.

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