Professional Practice

Revealing learners' beliefs and attitudes towards teachers and testing.

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Introduction

Within English language teaching (ELT), much ado has been made lately of promoting a movement toward a *learner-centred curriculum.* Such terms make a nice label, and sit well in blurbs on the back covers of textbooks and in flowery programme descriptions, but what do they mean in real terms for students and teachers? As its name suggests, 'learner-centred' means that the content of the syllabus is determined by how language is learned most *effectively* by the learner, rather than by what can be taught most *efficiently* by the teacher (see Nunan, 1988 on learner-centredness; see Brown, 1989 relating to effectiveness and efficiency); or what is described as "moving from a traditional textbook-based teaching approach to a more autonomous teaching-learning approach" (Seeman & Tavares, 2000). As such,

> education should develop in individuals the capacity to control their own destiny and that, therefore, the learner should be seen as being at the centre of the educational process. For the teaching institution and the teacher, this means that instructional programmes should be centred around learners' needs and that learners themselves should exercise their own responsibility in the choice of learning objectives, content and methods as well as in determining the means to assess their performance. (Brindley, 1984, cited in Nunan, 1988, p.15).

Certainly this movement came out of larger educational and ideological issues, but within ELT I understand this call for a move to learner-centredness as having grown out of two key developments (nice historical synopses are presented in Markee, 1997; White, 1988; and Yalden, 1987). The first was the move to *communicative* language teaching (another often- and over-used term!). The second involved a realisation that learners need "to develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning" (Little, 1991). In this sense, learner-centred is understood as *autonomous learning* (Little and Dam—in press). Both of these new emphases gained prominence in the 1970s and early 80s and continue to be active areas for theoretical exploration and research into the implications for practical application. The shift from concentrating on the target language itself to a focus on the learning process means that:

> **the generative educational aim is to make the students understand, maximize and control their cognitive powers and cognitive weaknesses. Learner differences which teachers have always been aware of are now a valuable resource to exploit. Self-direction, learner autonomy, and negotiation are the order of the day. (Gray, 1990, p.263)**

A lot of attention in the area of learning autonomy and self-direction has been paid to

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self-instruction, self-access centres and 'learning to learn' models, probably since many conceptualisations of autonomy stressed the independence from formal instruction. This is reflected in a view of autonomy as "the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention of a teacher" (Benson, 1997, p.18). Such a statement, however, represents one of the basic misconceptions of autonomous learning (Esch, 1997), and as Little and Dam point out, "according to this view, classrooms are a matter of administrative convenience, a necessary evil" (in press). Most EFL learning still takes place in a classroom, with a teacher, who is working from a set syllabus—most often the textbook; at least this is certainly the case at my school here in Oaxaca. It's not that we are against ideas of learner autonomy, or even entirely incapable of putting learning training or similar schemes for promoting autonomy into practice. It's just that we are first concerned with marking papers, preparing and correcting tests, and planning lessons for the following day. The reality of our school setting is that teachers need to teach towards the course objectives, so as to be able to administer tests which reflect those aims in order to give the student a grade.

An intriguing question then arises: is there a way to reconcile institutional demands for student assessment with curriculum goals of promoting learner autonomy? Aren't testing and autonomy contradictory concepts? I will attempt to address this a little later on.

For the moment, I would like to return to some views on learner autonomy. Dickinson (1993), for example, describes it as "an attitude to language learning" (p.330), while Benson (1997) puts it in terms of "a capacity (a construct of attitudes and abilities) which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning" (p.18). What these have in common, then, is that one of the underlying notions in the discussion of autonomy is that of learner *attitudes*. What is implicit, and perhaps lacking in some so-called 'learner training' courses is the understanding that even if you equip the learner with the ability to become autonomous, the learner will only embrace it if she brings attitudes that allow her to do so (see Cotterall, 1995). So when Benson (1997) asks: "Is it possible to 'teach' learners how to be autonomous without at the same time denying their autonomy?" (p.9), the point he is making is that setting autonomy as a goal involves not only showing the learner *how* to be autonomous; she reached an awareness of *why* she needs to be autonomous. Clemente (2000b), makes a strong argument in connecting learner attitudes to underlying beliefs to the behaviours that arise from these in language learning.

With this framework in mind, I would like to look in concrete terms at how these learner attitudes manifest themselves with a formal institutional setting. I will look first at students' attitudes towards teachers, and try to interpret these within the dynamic of the teacher-student role relationship. Next I will examine comments regarding views on testing and consider what attitudes are behind them, and to what extent they reflect awareness on the part of the students. Finally I conclude by trying to bring these aspects together, to consider whether or not it's possible to reconcile them in a school setting.

Context for interpretation

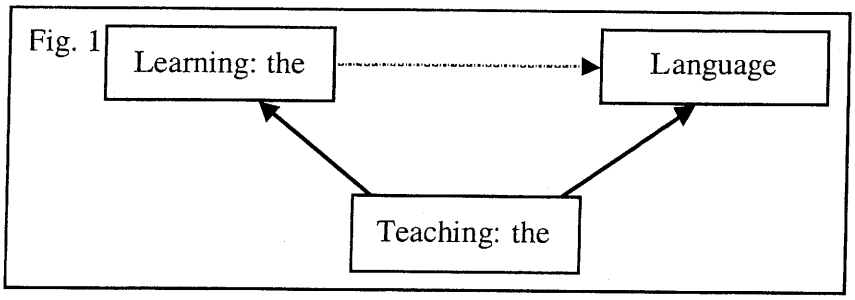
The comments presented below in boxes 1-5 were given by students as part of an evaluation carried out last April to look at proficiency testing and its effects on teaching (washback) in the English programme. A summary of some of the actual data obtained from the 80 students who participated is included as an appendix. All are students of the BA (*licenciatura*) programme in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), which was established at the Language Centre here in Oaxaca in 1992. The degree programme is similar to others across Mexico; it is designed to educate and train professionals in the field of ELT, and includes studying applied linguistics, methodology, literature, and most importantly, English. As part of a larger effort to evaluate and reform the *licenciatura* curriculum, this study

aimed at measuring the students' views and reactions to the English 'exit exam' that had been implemented as an additional requirement for graduation in 1997. The actual test given is a mock version of the First Certificate Exam (FCE) from the University of Cambridge. This is a global language proficiency test, similar to the more familiar TOEFL. The justification for having added this testing requirement is to ensure (by this I mean 'Encourage & Enforce') that graduates have an acceptable minimum level of proficiency in the language. The students' support—or lack of it—for the testing and specifically the FCE, a British test, was measured using a series of simple 'Yes/No' type questions (see appendix). To help in the interpretation of the data, and to add some depth to the evaluation, the student questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question: "Does the test work or not?" What was most surprising and revealing about the responses was how many referred, not to the test, but back to the teachers. To this extent, the test serves as a focal point, and the students' answers ultimately revealed a lot about their feelings and attitudes towards teachers.

The learner-teacher role relationship

Upon enrolling in an English course and entering the classroom, the learner places the teacher as an intermediary between herself and the target language. This is what Wright (1990) describes as the *teaching as intervention* model, as shown in figure 1. To what extent, however, does the teacher determine the content and direction of the actual learning process?

Fig. 1



Again, this question addresses larger curriculum issues that I mentioned in the introduction. Nevertheless, at the classroom-level, many metaphors have been suggested in an attempt to set the framework for describing the teacher's interventionist role (see for example Riley, 2000; Bowen & Marks, 1994; Lynch, 1990). Similarly, many attempts have been made to redefine the teacher's role so as to give her a friendlier stance towards learner independence, such as *facilitator of learning, resource person,* or *learning counsellor* (see Wendon, 1991). Regardless of what metaphor-evoking label is pasted on the teacher, we find that "the teacher-learner role relationship lies at the very heart of the classroom process. Learning a language is a social activity above all, and in a classroom setting, it is subject to a unique set of social conventions" (Wright, 1990, p.83). In other words, the process of learning in the classroom is characterised by the nature of the relationship between student and teacher, and student to student. The way a learner perceives this relationship, then, must certainly influence strongly her attitudes towards her own learning.

The dynamics of the relationship are rarely what is prescribed in the course curriculum. Instead, as Littlejohn (1997) argues, they "emerge 'experientially', that is, they emerge through the learners' experience of the manner in which teaching and learning is organized, rather than through its overt content" (p.182). It stands to reason then, that learners who have had a negative learning experience will project this onto their teachers. Comments to this effect included the following:

Box 1: The "Test Isn't Fair Because the Teachers Can't Teach" group.

- Σ *No deben exigir pasar el FCE [First Certificate Exam] porque en el Centro de Idiomas no hay maestros capacitados.*
- Σ *Hay maestros que no tienen las suficientes bases para preparar a los alumnos... 'because' hay maestros que no entienden la pronunciación y no explican bien.*
- Σ *No hay maestros realmente preparados para impartir el curso de FCE.*
- Σ *Aunque es un examen completo... no está muy bien desarrollado por el maestro.*
- Σ *No hay suficiente capacitación de los maestros para enseñar el FCE. "L "*

The point really isn't whether this blame is justified or not. Probably it is to some extent, if not in such an over-stated way. What's more interesting is to look at what is underlying these generalised negative attitudes. Could we, for example, correlate these statements to students who have poor performance, as measured by grades? Are these, in fact, more autonomous learners, who reject what they perceive as the teacher imposing artificial or not personally relevant learning objectives on them? Unfortunately the anonymity of the questionnaire prevented any kind of protocol analysis type research to try to correlate these comments to a profile of the type of learner who made them.

What seems to be a clearer example, however, are those students who placed criticism on the level of Mexican English teachers in general, either out of cynicism or as a sort of justification for their own mediocre achievement with learning the language:

Box 2: The "Mediocre is Good Enough" group.

- Σ *Solo con el nivel que tiene cada estudiante es suficiente para enseñar a secundarías.*
- Σ *La verdad que los maestros que ahora enseñan inglés no tienen ni siquiera un inglés intermedio.*

Is it going too far to say that these reflect the attitudes of unsuccessful, non-autonomous students? I don't think so, if we accept that "in formal educational contexts, the *basis* of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning" (Little, 1996, p.1). Here we can see the 'psychological relation' the students have made with the learning is one of shirking responsibility.

Beliefs about teachers

What seems to be lacking in all the above comments is some basic element of *reflection* towards the learner's attitude. The comments, nonetheless, are certainly motivated by certain *beliefs* the learners hold toward teaching. The beliefs, then, are reflected in the attitudes towards their own experiences with their teachers (following definitions of beliefs and attitudes in Clemente 2000b).

As I see it, this lack of reflection—being negative, but not particularly critical in a constructive sense—stems from a need for greater *awareness* on the part of the student. Following Flavell (1979), Clemente (2000a) explains that awareness constitutes a kind of 'metacognitive knowledge', which falls into several categories. Of particular interest is the category she defines as *person*, which includes beliefs about learners and teachers (p.160).

Contrast the comments in Boxes 1 and 2 with these statements:

Box 3: The "Critical Awareness" group.

- Σ *Los maestros tienen como su meta principal que los estudiantes pasen el examen y con ello "cumplir con su objetivo". Pienso que el examen está bien, pero la manera en que los maestros lo están enfocando es el problema.*
- Σ *Algunos maestros difieren en criterio para evaluar ciertas habilidades... Entonces esto afectará tanto nuestro aprendizaje (porque hay confusión [sic]) como nuestra calificación.*
- Σ *En todo caso si el maestro(a) se afana más en la estructura del exámen que en el contenido y significado del idioma el resultado que los alumnos obtenemos en el exámen, con el paso del tiempo se va devaluando.*
- Σ *La verdad es que la mayoría de los maestros se preocupan más por las técnicas de enseñanza que por el aprendizaje mismo del idioma.*
- Σ *De alguna manera la escuela debe evaluar nuestro conocimiento o dominio del inglés, pero está mal en la manera de como se nos prepara para presentar tal evaluación, más bien deberían motivarnos o mostrarnos el idioma en si y no solo como debemos aprender a contestar un examen.*
- Σ *Son absurdos los niveles de evaluación, es absurda la metodología orientada hacia la presentación del exámen.*

Here it's evident that these students are more 'tuned in' to their own attitudes about what is happening in the classroom. That it to say, they have a greater degree of awareness of the situation. Their perceptions about the teaching they have been exposed to is correspondingly more reflective. They have consciously analysed perceived shortcomings in how their teachers are directing their learning. Moreover, they speak to decisions they have made about the relative worth of the instruction they are receiving. By having tuned their awareness and become cognizant of their own beliefs and attitudes, they can recognise when teaching is serving them and when it is not. This is to say, they are in control of their learning; they are autonomous.

Reconciling autonomy and testing

Having looked at student beliefs and attitudes towards teachers and teaching, I would like to return to a question I posed in the introduction, namely: can we promote learner autonomy while at the same time holding students accountable by means of external tests? Is there some way to reconcile these concepts, or does one necessarily exclude the other?

On the surface, they appear to clash hopelessly. After all, a self-directed learner has accepted the responsibility for her own learning and taken charge of it. To this extent, she has control over the processes of her learning, and is therefore first and foremost accountable to herself. Contrarily, even the most communicative test must by nature take control and accountability out of the hands of the learner. This contradiction within the framework of communicative language teaching (CLT) was recognised by theorists as early as twenty years ago, before "The Communicative Approach " and "Learner-Centred" had entered the ELT lexicon. As Morrow (1979) points out that even back then there was a "considerable imbalance" between materials being developed and calls for changes in methodology based on new ELT and SLA theory, and methods for assessment which "still reflect, on the whole, the idea about language and how it should be tested which fail to take account of these recent developments" (p.143).

This dilemma constantly resurfaces in attempts to put learner-centred curricula into practice in formal educational settings. These impede implementation of various aspects of the goals of the curriculum, (for example how to assess students following a process-type

syllabus) but perhaps most importantly regarding issues of autonomy. Clemente (unpublished) explains that the definition of autonomy is complete if it involves: 1. the learner's role, 2. her interaction with the teacher, and 3. the context in which they interact. The introduction to this paper briefly considered her first point, and the above discussion has focused on the second. The problem of testing is encompassed under her third aspect, that of the context.

By *context* we can understand learning and teaching within the framework of the language curriculum. This is particular to the institution, its values and goals, its politics, standing and role within the community, etc. Again the problem is that the role of testing "has become increasingly unclear in the past few years ... [as] evaluators have come to recognize that the processes that take place in a language program are at least as important as the products of the program" (Bachman, 1989, p.13). Moreover, "most of these processes, indeed those that are of greatest interest, that take place in the minds of learners are extremely difficult to measure" (ibid). If, for example, one of your goals as a teacher is to help your students raise their awareness of the language and increase their metacognitive knowledge, that's certainly an excellent objective, but how do you measure your learners' success on a monthly test?

Obviously, there are many kinds of tests or exams, and in any event a test is merely one means of assessing students. Recent research on methods of assessment present language teachers with a wide array of alternatives (see Brown and Hudson, 1998). Of particular interest for researchers of learner autonomy are methods for *self-assessment.* An early example of how self-assessment has been used in a 'school' setting is the Bournemouth Eurocentre experiment (described in Holec, 1980). Again, the goal is that the learner should not only measure her own performance, gains, and problem areas with the language, but that she herself examines the processes of her learning and chooses her own criteria for assessment.

The main objection to traditional testing in terms of learner autonomy is that the learner has no control over the content or criteria for testing. This is reflected in comments made by learners, such as:

Box 4: The "Tests Don't Evaluate What's Important" group.

- Σ *Un examen no mide tu capacidad intelectual.*
- Σ *El examen es como una barrera al aprendizaje.*
- Σ *No es muy interesante para nosotros, para aprender una segunda lengua no es muy motivante. No nos sentimos motivados, por el contrario, yo me desespero...*
- Σ *No es justo que nos evaluan todo un proceso solo con un examen.*

Especially revealing is the last comment. Again, it addresses the incompatibility of the idea of evaluating a formative process with a summative measurement. We ask the students to focus on and engage in the learning process, and then turn around and hold them accountable for a product, i.e. tangible objectives in the target language as defined by teachers and administrators.

Such beliefs about testing are encompassed by another category of metacognitive knowledge which Flavell calls *task* (again, explained Clemente, 2000a). Following this model, we understand that awareness allows students to reflect critically and meaningfully on their beliefs and attitudes about teachers (person), as well as processes—or lack thereof—of their learning, in this case in relation to the tests they are required to take (task). Awareness of beliefs and attitudes about these elements of the person and task categories enable the stu-

dent to reflect on the third category of metacognitive knowledge, that of *strategy*. The term 'strategy' here refers to the learner's capacity to reflect on the way she carries out her learning processes. In concrete terms, we can say that in the present case the more reflective a student is about her teachers and the tests she must take, the more she is able to think critically about appropriateness of the exam within her own learning goals, and possibly how to incorporate it (however unwillingly she has to take the test) into her learning processes:

Box 5: The "Test as a Self-Diagnosis" group.

Σ	*Es una forma de ver que conocimientos tiene el alumno y cuál es su capacidad para desempeñarse en el área, además puede notar en que necesita practicar más. Además es buena referencía para nosotros.*

Conclusions

In this paper I have attempted to see how the context of a school setting, and its system of accountability which is external the learner, affect student attitudes towards teachers and testing.

While the scope of this investigation has been quite limited, it's important to keep in mind that this discussion takes place within the framework of the evolution and continuing attempts to put communicative language teaching into practice. Many practical and ideological issues still need to be worked out; not the least of which is dealing with the social and psychological ramifications of a move to learner autonomy. Even within discussion of the facilitation of autonomous learning, ironically most literature focuses on how the teacher must re-define her role in the teacher-learner relationship. Learner-centredness may seek to shift the focus from teaching to learning, but doesn't this presuppose that the student will automatically centre on herself? Mexican learners are still very teacher-oriented. Imposing a shift is not giving the student independence; we as teachers need to work to raise student awareness.

Raising awareness is not just asking the student to reflect on learning. It is asking her to reflect on her beliefs and attitudes towards her process of learning. As such, you ask her to engage what are called 'second-order beliefs'. This is to say, that she "focuses not on the world or behaviour or facts, but on [her] ideas about the world" (Clemente, 2000a, p.163). If the student engages in this kind of metacognitive thinking, she frees herself from the restraints of the institutional setting. She uses her awareness to make conscious decisions about her learning. She defines her learning experience—in a traditional classroom, taking tests, dealing with 'the school system'—in her own terms. Tests may well exert control over the content of learning, but, for autonomous students, tests cannot control the process of learning. The student takes control and responsibility of her learning regardless, and in spite of, external systems of accountability. In this way, she doesn't so much *reconcile* external pressures with her own autonomy as she does *overcome* them.

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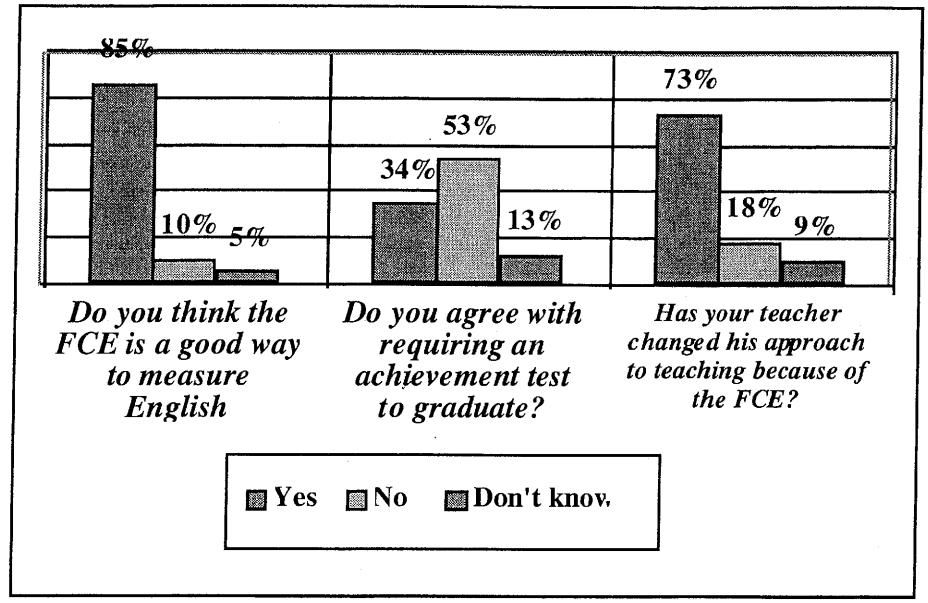
Appendix