REFLECTIONS ON THE IATEFL LASIG PCE, GLASGOW, 19th MARCH 2012

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Introduction

I believe that taking part in in the events of the annual IATEFL conference is the dream of many English teachers around the world. My own dream came true after I was granted with one of the first two awards the Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group (LASIG) offered towards the expenses to attend its Pre-Conference Event (PCE). Even though I was a little nervous when entering the Glasgow Conference Centre, the venue for this year's IATEFL event, the smiling faces of the organisers made me feel happy and eager to join the audience. Let me share a brief report of the academic activities of this day and my own reflection on them.

The PCE started with a very warm and welcoming introduction of **Leni Dam, the LASIG coordinator,** which gave all the participants (about 60) a chance to greet each other in an enthusiastic and cheerful atmosphere. After brief announcements on the day agenda, Leni introduced the first plenary speaker **David Little (Dublin, Ireland)**, a well-known academic in the field of EFL, whose work is tightly connected with the concept of learner autonomy from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

First plenary

The insightful theoretical input of **David Little** opened up the overall theme of the event – *language learner autonomy across borders*. His speech addressed several issues of the learner autonomy concept starting with illustrative examples of the implementation of learner autonomy, continuing with the aspects of operationalisation in the classroom, and finalising with an analysis of specific features of borders between various educational

domains, *in* and *out* of class environments and *between* educational cultures. In his speech, David Little emphasized the importance of the non-traditional dynamic of autonomous classrooms where '…distinctions between listening/speaking and reading/writing are difficult to maintain' and 'the boundaries between intentional learning and creative text production are fuzzy'. The learner autonomy aspects mentioned by David such as 'mutual commitment and engagement', 'authentic language use', 'learners' interests and personal priorities' were broadly discussed by the participants during the breaks.

Session 1: Examples of 'Autonomy in Action'

The four posters shown in this session embraced quite diverse cultural and educational autonomy-oriented backgrounds of the presenters. **Carol Everhard (Greece)** focused her poster on students' peer- and self-assessment, whereas **Robert Moncrief (Finland)** demonstrated results of his questionnaire on 'out-of-class language learning'. Carol and Robert shared with the audience their research findings demonstrating learner autonomy principles from different perspectives. These two presenters were also quite busy during the breaks explaining the details of their projects to some inquiring participants.

As a practitioner who is engaged in creating autonomous syllabus in my own English classes, I was very interested in the poster by **Bob Morrison (Japan)**, who presented a language course based on the autonomous circle of students' planning, implementing, evaluating and modifying the syllabus on their own. I find his ideas extremely important and inspiring for university lecturers, especially those who are working on the design of new courses.

A very distinctive 'example of autonomy in action' was introduced by **Mirza Tariqm, Sarwat Reza and Kathryn Kelly (Bangladesh)**. This team from the British Council presented an impressive government's ongoing project intended for Bangladeshi very young population to access both the new technologies and the learning of English. It was really moving to see how people trying to meet basic needs are eager to learn new things and open up for new opportunities.

Sessions 2 and 3: Examples of 'Autonomy in Action – across borders'

Five 15-minutes' inputs focused on various aspects of learner autonomy in practice and offered insightful contributions to the Pre-conference event. Here, I should introduce **Dorte Asmussen (Denmark)** who, being a relatively new person in the field as I am, became an awardee of LASIG, and had a chance to share her own experience of fostering autonomous learning in this part of the programme.

Dorte's talk as well as the video recordings of her autonomy classroom work demonstrated successful outcomes of her young learners. For instance, their logbooks made an incredible impression on the audience and showed how creative and enthusiastic children could be in an autonomous environment. Their engagement resulted in the fantastic work, interaction in the target language, and learning a lot from each other. One of Dorte's remarks was her

'insecurity about how to find enough materials'. I hope that the ideas I suggested in my presentation 'A Learner Autonomy Toolbox' prove to be useful as one of the possible solutions for Dorte and other teachers working without textbooks. I also took advantage of this opportunity to show a wide range of students' works (such as quizzes, articles, and reflective notes) collected as learning materials and available to all my learners as well as all the school's learners and teachers (an English digital toolbox on school Intranet).

Three more talks pointed out the learner autonomy principles from perspectives relating to students' cultural and educational backgrounds. **Sanja Wagner (Germany)** focused her presentation on 'Fostering learner autonomy among migrant children'. Her talk was rich in fantastic examples of the learners' outcomes such as posters, logbooks, letters, or self-assessment checklists. Along with showing students' work, Sanja suggested some helpful ideas regarding larger projects and collaborative learning, which corresponded well with **Franziska Zeller' (Switcherland)** talk presenting her elaborative literature project conducted in Upper-intermediate/ Advanced classes. Based on a three-stage autonomous cycle (preparation/implementation/evaluation), this project involves a wide spectrum of aspects of autonomous learning including students' choices, decisions, collaborative discussions, and reflections. One more elaborative project was presented by **Katherine Thornton (Japan).** Talking about 'A curriculum for self-directed learning' , self-accessed and advisory-based systematic approach promoted at her university, Katherine was focused on the self-directed learning curriculum, which seemed to be an insightful continuation of the ideas Bob had mentioned in his poster.

Second plenary

This plenary was presented by **Scott Thornbury (New York)**, a worldwide famous academic and ELT trainer, whose insights and pedagogical principles seem to correspond with the learner autonomy concept. His plenary input focused on 'Unplugged teaching' and showed how 'to be freed from the artificial constrains imposed by course books and other 'imported' materials' through the portraits of great educators of the past as well as his own experience from the Dogme ELT movement. In his presentation, Scott pointed out how important it is to build up an authentic communication in a classroom based on students' interests, through materials they can bring or create on their own. 'Teaching should be done using only the resources that teachers and students bring to the classroom - i.e. themselves - and whatever happens to be in the classroom. If a particular piece of material is necessary for the lesson, a location must be chosen where that material is to be found (e.g. library, resource centre, bar, students' club….)'. As Scott noticed, both Dogme and Learner autonomy movements really share common ground and complement each other in their attempts to find the most effective and successful ways of teaching and learning English.

Final panel discussion with David Little and Scott Thornbury

Both expert speakers reflected on the most challenging areas of the audience's concerns such as dealing with resistant learners or skeptical parents. They pointed out some practical ways of crossing the borders or facing challenging situations concerning learner autonomy implementations. Some questions from the audience were focused on how to get appropriate materials or how to create an autonomous environment for the class work. Even if there was not enough time to respond to all the questions, the most important issues appeared to be covered. Personally, I appreciated that Scott emphasized the role of a teacher saying that the autonomous class is not the time for a teacher to have a cup of coffee while students 'working on their own'. I entirely agree with Scott and convinced myself that, compared with teachers whose preferences go with traditional teaching, those teachers who foster learner autonomy are significantly more engaged in what is going on in the classroom. Sharing responsibilities with students and empowering them makes the overall processes of teaching and learning more active and demanding.

It was also useful for me to hear how David deals with resistant students. His advice to let those students know that 'there is no way out' or 'there is no escape' reminded me of what I say in such situations to my students, '…we are now in the same boat, so whatever we do we should do it together, otherwise we could drown'. I am sure that this panel gave all the participants a great chance to take practical recommendations for their plans. It was a wonderful opportunity for all of us to get an immediate and meaningful feedback on our concerns from the great expert speakers.

Conclusion

Aside from my initial nervousness, I left the conference centre with the feeling that the LASIG PCE was a great success. As a teacher of both secondary and university levels, I found out especially striking the educational diversity of the PCE presenters, which enabled me to be familiarized with learner autonomy practices from various perspectives. I also appreciate the opportunity I was given to share my own experience with autonomy to other practitioners and researchers from all over the world. For these reasons, I also take this opportunity to send my thanks to all the organisers of this productive event in Glasgow, especially to Leni, whose friendly smile and utmost care accompanied and supported us throughout the day.