

# **DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THE HONG KONG SECONDARY CLASSROOM**

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## **Abstract**

Seen as beneficial, learner autonomy has transformed teachers' classroom practices in many ways. However, only few have investigated the strategies used in those classroom practices in the Hong Kong context. Capitalising on the in-depth nature of qualitative research, this study mainly draws on the interviews with three local English teachers to see how they develop learner autonomy in the Hong Kong secondary classroom and what influences those autonomy-based classroom practices. In those three cases, it is found that the notion of learner autonomy is generally embraced although it seems that the classroom practices are not purely shaped by learners. Instead, classroom practices are mainly guided (but not constrained) by the Scheme of Work because the implementation of the Scheme of Work can indeed grant flexibility and professional freedom to teachers in terms of a flexible teaching sequence and optional lesson activities. Under the guidance of the Scheme of Work, the participants reported to have utilised a range of strategies to enhance learner autonomy. Teachers are found to be agents of learner empowerment and reflective practitioners whereas students are encouraged to learn proactively and independently with teachers' presence. Besides, this study also reveals some personal and institutional factors that influence teachers' autonomy-based classroom practices.

## **1 Introduction**

Curriculum reforms around the world are becoming more homogenised as a result of globalisation (Mundy, 2005). They all seek to improve education quality (Cheng, Chow & Tsui, 2000) and effectiveness (Cheng, 2000). As Benson (2007) notes in a state-of-the-art article, one commonality across those globalised curricula is the increasing emphasis on learner autonomy. In Hong Kong, the notion of learner autonomy plays a vital role in shaping the approaches to learning and teaching, as reflected in the latest English language curriculum and assessment

guide for New Senior Secondary (Curriculum Development Council [CDC] & Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority [HKEAA], 2007). The guiding principles of the document serve to inform teachers' classroom practices. For instance, under the section of learner-centred instruction, teachers are asked to encourage learners to negotiate "on the learning objectives... [and the selection of] learning materials... and appropriate activities" (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, p. 73). This is clearly indicative of some of the 'dos' for teachers to support learner autonomy (Aoki, 2002). Although the official guide has offered teachers numerous autonomy-oriented directions on the planning and implementation of curriculum and lessons, the actual classroom practices may differ greatly owing to the intricate interactions amongst external (e.g. school culture and resources) and internal factors (e.g. teachers' personal constructs). This research sets out to see how teachers, regarding the development of learner autonomy, shape their own classroom practices.

Since the onset of the 90s, a wealth of literature has been supporting the promotion of learner autonomy on the ground that it makes language acquisition more effective (e.g. Aoki & Smith, 1999; Benson, 2001; Candy, 1991; Little, 2009). Moreover, considered conducive to students' learning, the idea of autonomy is often pursued as an explicit educational goal (Areglado, 1996; Benson, 2001; Finch, 2002). However, the validity of learner autonomy has been problematized for its potential ethnocentricity (Riley, 1988) and cultural embeddedness (Schmenk, 2005), especially in Asian settings (Smith, 2001). Despite so, Benson (2007) concludes from the recent literature that students in Asia "value freedom in language learning and the opportunity to direct their own learning" and that many studies did justify "the cultural appropriateness of autonomy" among non-Western students (p. 25).

This research is also part of the effort to address Nakata's (2011) wonder as to why there is so little research on learning autonomy in English learning. Added to the above, as the effective learner-autonomy-based strategies are still "a subject of ongoing empirical investigation" (Edwards, 2009, p. 14), the current research also serves to document some useful autonomy-based strategies for achieving learner autonomy in the Hong Kong English secondary classroom.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Learner autonomy**

In the early writings of learner autonomy, the term connotes learning on one's own without teachers (Benson, 2008). This definition of learner autonomy in situational terms de-emphasises the central role played by the teacher in the developmental process of learner autonomy (Little, 1995). Therefore, over the past 30 years, the essential role of teachers has been constantly

brought into defining learner autonomy (Benson, 2007) as an amendment to learner autonomy *purely* as situational freedom (Benson, 2008). The ultimate aim of developing learner autonomy is to enable one to “act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives” (Holec, 1981, p. 1), or in Littlewood’s (1997) term, to develop “autonomy as a person” (p. 81).

Holec’s (1981) definition remains “remarkably robust” (Benson, 2007, p. 22) in the field: “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 4). Little (1991) later built up his definition with a focus on psychology – “autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (p. 4). Afterwards, different definitions, which “do not simply represent academic positions... [but also]... practical implications” (Palfreyman, 2003, p. 184), emerged but as sustained by Oxford (2003), “no single perspective [of learner autonomy] should be considered antithetical to any other” (p. 90). The different versions of learner autonomy were briefed in Benson’s (2007) state-of-the-art article on autonomy in language education. This study adopts Benson’s (2001) definition – “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (p. 47) because Huang (2007) quoting Benson (2001) asserted that the notion of control seems to be “more open to investigation” (p. 31) than that of ‘take charge’ and ‘responsibility’.

## ***2.2 Teacher autonomy***

The notion of teacher autonomy arose as the literature on learner autonomy started to swell, for teacher autonomy is often considered a prerequisite for learner autonomy (McGrath, 2000). Like learner autonomy, teacher autonomy is a multifaceted concept that can be interpreted in many appropriate ways (Benson, 2001)

In Benson’s (2010) study on the constraints on teacher autonomy in Hong Kong, teacher autonomy was operationalised as “both the freedom and internal capacity to exercise discretion in matters of curriculum implementation” (Benson & Huang, 2008). This definition entails many scholars’ ideas on what teacher autonomy should look like. Teachers’ freedom and capacity to make decisions imply what Smith (2000) defines as a sense of control over teaching. Furthermore, the word ‘capacity’ carries a tinge of psychological qualities of a teacher. It may hint at the willingness to “create spaces within their working environments” (Benson & Huang, 2008, p. 430) for enhancing learner control despite various teachers’ constraints. Due to its ‘catch-all’ nature, Benson & Huang’s (2008) definition is adopted in this study.

Some theorists attempted to enrich the discussion on teacher autonomy by bringing more constructs into play. For instance, the notions of reflection over teaching practices which are

well-defined by Schön (1987) are considered necessary for teacher autonomy to thrive. Others regard teachers' professional development as necessary. To be more precise, teachers are urged to critically reflect upon "how far their actions reflect those [teachers' own] beliefs or are in keeping with them" (William & Burden, 1997, p. 55) and "the affective and cognitive control of the teaching process" (Little, 1995, p. 179). With a view to developing teacher autonomy, the products of reflections are realised in reshaped teaching practices (Vieira, 1999).

Aside from treating teacher autonomy as an individual's affairs, there is also a bulk of literature on teacher autonomy development in a collaborative teaching community. In Constructivist's terms, collaborations are vital in the co-construction of knowledge where teachers grow professionally and intellectually through negotiation of meaning. For instance, as an act to support teacher and learner autonomy, collaborative observations followed by reflections "may act as a stimulus for change and empowerment for both the observed and the observer" (Vieira, Barbosa, Paiva & Fernandes, 2008, p. 225). However, biases and extreme power asymmetry amongst members of a teaching community can make collaborative observation and reflections "a threatening and/ or acritical activity" (Vieira et al., 2008, p. 225).

The above showcases different understandings towards teacher autonomy and how it is pertinent to other relevant concepts in education. The next part intends to inquire into the factors that influence the exercise of teacher autonomy.

### ***2.3 Factors affecting the exercise of teacher autonomy***

To conceptualise the constraints on the exercise of teacher autonomy, Benson (2000) came up with four aspects. 'Policy constraints' is the first aspect, pointing to the education policies that are imposed from the external environment. In Hong Kong, the language policies designed by the Education Bureau can be perceived as a policy constraint. Second, known as institutional factors, they exist within the school boundary and are related to school-based policies and the degree to which teachers can make institutional decisions (Aoki, 2002). Added to the above are teachers' conceptions of the language. To put it differently, they refer to teachers' own ideological voice over the nature of language learning. Being the last on the list, 'language teaching methodologies' can also constitute "ideological constraints on what counts as learning" (Benson, 2000, p. 116).

Other than Benson (2000), some theorists have revealed other factors. Pinter (2007) sustains that time is a crucial factor for teacher autonomy development while Aoki (2002) adds the 'micro-culture of the teaching environment' and 'teachers' working conditions' to the list of

institutional factors.

At times, “teachers often find themselves in a dilemma between what their reflection tells them to do and what they are expected to do if restrictions are not negotiable” (Aoki, 2002, p. 114). This remark has been proven valid in the Hong Kong context. Benson (2010) conducted a collective case study to probe into the constraints on teacher autonomy in local secondary schools. He unveiled that the constraints on teacher autonomy revolved around the “‘Scheme of Work’, school-based supervision and surveillance mechanisms” (p. 259) – which fall on the institutional side (*ibid.*). Yet, he also noted the teachers’ capabilities to internalise the constraints and create spaces for exercising teacher autonomy. This is in line with what Vieira et al. (2008) positively upheld – constraints can somehow be transformed into possibilities with hope.

#### ***2.4 Students and the teacher: a dynamic view***

The idea of students and teachers co-constructing lessons has already emerged in 1991. Later, Little (1995) drew on the concept and highlighted the dialogic nature of learner autonomy development with the involvement of both teachers and learners. Teachers and students are said to be interdependent (rather than, independent) upon each other in a “pedagogical dialogue” (Little, 1995, p. 178): the teacher needs to take – e.g. the institution s/he is working in, the age and target language proficiency of his students – into consideration when deciding how autonomous the students should or can be and to what extent the students can proactively participate in the learning process (e.g. selection of learning materials and establishment of learning goals).

Following Little’s (1995) concept of interdependence, La Ganza (2008) proposed a model of interdependent relationships between teachers and students – the Dynamic Interrelational Space (DIS) model. He asserted that *developing* and *maintaining* learner autonomy is only ‘meaningful’ with relevance to the dynamics he depicted in the model (La Ganza, 2008). If his claim is true, the model can more insightfully inform the autonomy-based classroom practices with regard to the “hard-won” (Little, 1991, p.5) and “incremental” (Benson, 2002, p. 10) nature of learner autonomy development.

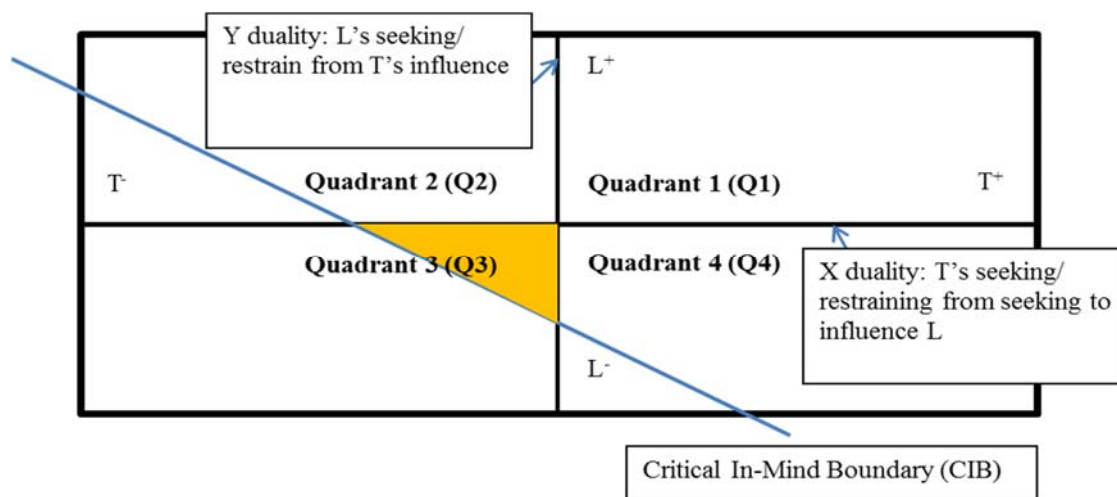


Fig. 1. The Dynamic Interrelational Space (DIS) model (La Ganza, 2008, p. 68)

With reference to Figure 1, T and L represent ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ respectively in a particular psycho-social context where learning autonomy emerges whereas “+” and “-” denote ‘to seek to influence’ and ‘to restrain from seeking to influence’ accordingly. T and L and “+” and “-” combine to form the X and Y dualities. The duality of X encompasses “T<sup>+</sup>”/ “T<sup>-</sup>”, expressing T’s seeking to influence L and T’s restraint from seeking to influence L. This same applies to the Y duality. Indeed, this idea of teacher’s holding back or letting go was pioneered in Dam’s (1995) resource book for learner autonomy – “learners are encouraged to make decisions concerning their own learning, where the teacher dares to let go” (p. 6). Another unique feature is the CIB which represents an imaginary dissecting line beyond which cohesion in the teacher-learner relationship breaks down. Learner autonomy resides in the shaded region in Q3 bound by the X-axis, Y-axis and CIB which is characterised by a cognitive-affective phase of T-L, signifying both T’s and L’s restraint from influencing each other: L is in pursuit of ‘[self] empowerment’ without T’s influence as the T is also in restraint from influencing the L. However, beyond the CIB, the degree of interrelation (i.e. interdependence) between T and L tends to be a minimum, causing the T-L relationship breakdown. With respect to this, one pedagogical implication can be drawn – to prevent falling beyond the CIB, teachers must develop the capacity for concern for their students (La Ganza, 2008) to maintain a dynamic and quality relationship conducive to the development of learner autonomy. In practice, the teacher needs to accompany the learner “so that the learner can feel supported by the teacher, and the learner needs to develop the capacity to reach out to the teacher as a resource” (La Ganza, 2008, p. 70). Indeed, here echoes what Dam (1995) considers a prerequisite for developing learner autonomy – “a feeling of confidence, trust, acceptance and respect on the part of teachers and learners alike” (p. 79).

Furthermore, also worth noting is the application of the term ‘empowerment’ to explain learner autonomy in a mathematical Cartesian system. Indeed, learner empowerment is reminiscent of many attempts to describe and bring learner autonomy into classroom practices, as discussed in the next sections.

### ***2.5 Learner autonomy and principles of learner-centred classroom practices***

Learner-centredness “provides a good basis for the development of learner autonomy” (Chan, 2000, p. 76) as justified by the personal construct theory (Little, 1991). Therefore, the very first step towards learner autonomy development is to re-orient the existing classroom practices to be more learner-centred.

As noted by Cullen, Harris & Hill (2012), learner-centred classroom practices revolve around three principles: creating community, sharing power and using assessment for improvement.

What they termed as ‘community’ is indeed ‘learning community’ which is defined as “any group of people, whether linked by geography or some other shared interest, which addresses the learning needs of its members through proactive partnerships” (Kearns, McDonald, Candy, Knights & Papadopoulos, 1999, p. 61-62). The phrase ‘proactive partnerships’ highlights the nature of a community as team-based, collaborative and interactive. Cullen et al. (2012) maintains that community building enables learners to “feel safe to experiment” (p. 65). As added by Vieira et al. (2008), learners “learn how to learn by [experimenting on] a wide range of socio-affective and (meta)cognitive learning strategies” (p. 222).

Power sharing – “a [partial] transfer of power from teachers to learners” (Fisher, Hafner & Young, 2007, p. 33) – is another feature of learner-centred curricula. Learner empowerment “fosters the development of learner autonomy” (Cullen et al., 2012, p. 67-68). As briefed in earlier sections, learner autonomy is not equal to learning without teachers and teachers and students, linked inter-dependently, are constantly influencing each other in the context of autonomy development. That is why the power does not pass wholly, but only *partially*, from teachers to learners. In the actual classroom practice, teachers can manifest this partial empowerment by offering learners choices and responsibility (Cullen et al., 2012). In section 2.6, the causal relationship between learner autonomy and empowerment is explored in greater depth.

Last, concerning the use of assessment for improvement, Cullen et al. (2012) assert that assessments can be used as the basis for curriculum design and as a monitoring tool for students’

progress. Four types of assessments are introduced: teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher, peer and self-assessments. A component of reflection is at the heart of all types of assessments in order to yield improvements. With learner-centredness in mind, Cullen et al. (2012) further encourage the use of a ‘back-ward’, outcome-based approach to learner-centred curriculum development. The next section takes a step further to discuss the ‘whats’ and ‘hows’ of reflection and its relevance to the autonomy-based classroom practices.

### ***2.6 Towards greater learner autonomy: three principles***

According to Little, Ridley & Ushioda (2002), there are three interrelated principles – learner empowerment, learner reflection and appropriate target language use – towards greater learner autonomy.

The principle of learner empowerment can be explained in psychology’s terms. Empowering learners is synonymous to letting them have (though, not full) control over their actions and responsibility for the outcomes. This kind of responsibility sharing is actually one of the essentials of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which facilitates “joint negotiation” (Breen & Candlin, 2001, p. 18) between learners and teachers in an interdependent relationship (cf. La Ganza, 2008), or what Little (1995) coined a “pedagogical dialogue” (p. 178). However, as learners are held responsible for the choices they make or are not proficient in the language enough, they tend to develop fear over making wrong choices and coming across impediments. Little et al. (2002) explain that if we believe in our own efficacy, it will result in motivation and achievement. The motivation generated is mainly intrinsic and is going to make out-of-class learning possible. Little et al. (2002) then went on saying that “the support and encouragement we are given by other people” (p. 16) can be that belief. Therefore, the teacher’s role comes in as one that decides how far learners should be empowered and one that supports learners affectively and cognitively.

The second principle is learner reflection. Students should be granted the opportunity to “reflect upon language and language learning process” (Vieira et al., 2008, p. 222). Having engaged in continuous collaborative reflection as routine, teachers and learners negotiate on pedagogical decision-making tasks (Vieira et al., 2008). The tasks, ranging from lesson objectives to learning activities, concern the whole learning process. Afterwards, both long-term and short-term goals are co-established, developing “a sense of the trajectory” (Little et al., 2002, p. 18) of students’ own learning. Again this is the time committed teachers should step in to provide any cognitive-affective support to their learners, as maintained by La Ganza (2008) using the DIS model.



Appropriate target language use is the third principle. In view of language as a procedural skill, it is suggested that a language develops only through use. Here teacher's role is to conduct all lessons in English (Cook, 2001), creating an English-rich environment for language immersion. However, the English teacher should be proficient at modifying (i.e. simplification and reformulation) his English utterances to be comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985).

Having visited the three principles, it is noted that they are related to such psychological and English language teaching (ELT) concepts as learner belief, intrinsic motivation, and comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). It is evident that the three principles gain extensive theoretical support. What is more is that they bear a strong resemblance to the descriptions of La Ganza's (2008) DIS model, in that teachers' cognitive-affective support and intensity of learner empowerment are central concerns in an autonomous classroom.

### ***2.7 Pedagogical steps for autonomous classroom practices***

Some theorists of learner autonomy, like Reinder (2010), maintain that "it is not always clear how individual teachers can implement the underlying principles" (p. 43). Therefore it leads to a rise of literature in the field to focus on the steps in shaping autonomous classroom practices.

To start with, Dam (1995) maintains that there are five basic steps in a teaching/ learning cycle, namely gathering of experience/ evaluation, planning, carrying out the plans, evaluation and new planning. Throughout the whole sequence, teachers are encouraged to encompass the ideas of "The Flower" (Figure 2). "The Flower", with an eye to encouraging learner autonomy in classrooms, indeed provides directions in six aspects, from materials, aims and objectives and evaluation to activities, learners' roles and teachers' roles. The six aspects of encouraging learner autonomy appear as separated petals but meanwhile they join to form a unity by negotiation between students and teachers.

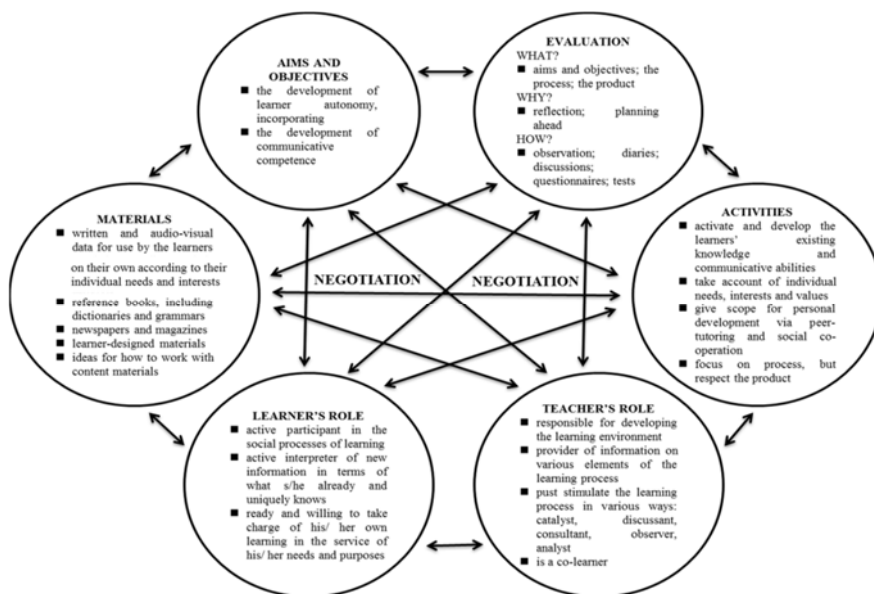


Fig. 2. "The Flower" (Dam, 1995, p. 46-47)

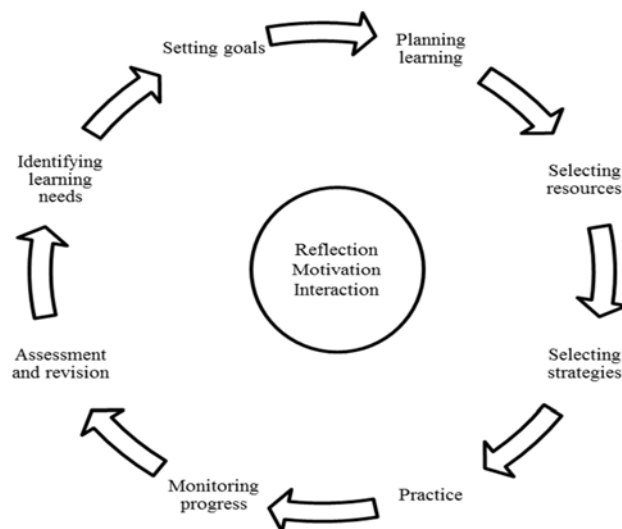


Fig. 3. Cycle for autonomous learning (Reinder, 2010, p. 51)

Reinder (2010) proposes a similar cycle for autonomous learning; however, with steps circumvolving, the centre consists of three attributes – reflection, motivation and interaction – which are well-established classic notions of language learning theories. Reflection, which has been discussed fully above, is thought to be indispensable from a cognitive viewpoint. Motivation and interaction pertain to learning as an affective process and as a social activity respectively.

This chapter has built a theoretical understanding for this research project: it has gone through some essential concepts of learner and teacher autonomy and how students and teachers are

positioned in an interdependent relationship. Principles and steps of encouraging learner autonomy are also explored.

### **3 Method**

In Hong Kong, the notion of learner autonomy has been influencing local classroom practices. English language teachers, however, realise the notion differently given a range of opportunities and constraints, both internal and external. To explore this, two research questions were formulated.

#### ***3.1 Research Questions***

1. How do English teachers develop learner autonomy in the Hong Kong secondary classroom?
2. What influences English teachers' classroom practices to develop learner autonomy?

#### ***3.2 Research Design***

This is a piece of “basic qualitative research” which is described by Merriam (2009) as “generic, basic and interpretative” (p. 22). It takes the form of a multiple case study, enabling an in-depth view into the present complex issue of learner autonomy development in the classroom (Johansson, 2003; Merriam, 2009). The present research seeks to see how teachers' classroom practices which orient to learner autonomy arising from different external (e.g. school culture) and internal factors (e.g. teachers' personal attributes).

#### ***3.3 Context and Participants***

This research drew on purposeful sampling where participants were selected based on the following:

1. The participants must be in-service Hong Kong English teachers.
2. They must be teaching in a local secondary school.
3. They are willing to share and articulate their views on English education.

The participants who fulfilled the criteria were selected based on their potential to generate some rich data for understanding the research questions. The width and depth of qualitative research are negatively correlated with each other; thus, it is always formidable to make

decisions as to how many participants should be picked (Flick, 2006). Since this study aims to discover the complex interplay between different factors that influence teachers' classroom practices to develop learner autonomy, the number of participants should be relatively small. A smaller number of participants enable the research to give an in-depth picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, in this study, three participants from different schools were invited.

### **3.4 Data collection**

The data were drawn from two rounds of interviews with participants (except for Alan who was too busy for the second round). The interviews conducted in English were all face-to-face and one-on-one.

Before the first interview was initiated, an interview protocol was prepared beforehand to provide the researcher with "the questions to be asked, and space to take notes of responses from the interviewee" (Creswell, 2012, p. 225). In the interviewing process, the participants were asked open-ended questions to encourage open-ended responses. This is to ascertain that the participants can narrate their experiences irrespective of the researcher's perspective (Creswell, 2012) and that they can have "options for responding... without being forced into response possibilities (*ibid.*). In addition, one worth-noting point is that research questions are not asked directly (Mears, 2012).

With the prior consent of all participants, the interviews were audio-taped and field notes were taken by the researcher during the interview process. The interviews were conducted through a progressive focusing approach (Woods, 1985). In the first round of interview, the first session of the interview mainly served to look at the life-history and biographical details of the teachers. This is justified on the theory that every teacher's different attributes inevitably result in a unique interpretation of the curriculum (Little, 1991). Therefore, it is clear that having a closer look at the teachers' background helps generate more insight for the data analysis. As for the second session of this interview, it focused on how they attempted to develop learner autonomy at school and what influences their classroom practices in regard to learner autonomy development.

Afterwards, the second round of interviews was a follow-up. In this interview, the researcher asked for clarification and explanation of some elusive issues raised in the first interview (Mears, 2012).

Apart from interviews, the data for analysis were also from telephone conversations with the participants (with field notes taken) and some classroom artefacts, such as the Scheme of Work, and teaching portfolio. The teaching portfolio was obtained from Dr. Huang with prior consent. Following the essence of triangulation, it is hoped that the validity of the research can be ensured (Johansson, 2003).

### ***3.5 Data Analysis***

The interviews and conversations were transcribed. Then the transcripts were coded line by line and/or paragraph by paragraph (Flick, 2006) and the codes are then categorised and generalized into thematic units to see if there are inter-relationships between themes and how to relate the units to the research questions. This process is called thematic coding (Flick, 2006). Also worth noting is the fact that the data collection process overlaps the process of data analysis. This is because this “allows researchers to take advantage of flexible data collection” which ascertains “the freedom to make adjustments” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 539). Simply put, if interesting points worthy of a close scrutiny pop up when analysing data, researchers can always initiate another interview or informal chat to generate a potential point for discussion.

## **4 Results**

Synthesised from the interviews, researcher’s field notes and other classroom artefacts, the findings are qualitatively reported in the form of stories.

### ***4.1 Alan’s story***

He was raised locally. He described his primary education as only having “chalk-and-talk”. Similar to his primary teachers, his secondary English teachers mainly adopted Direct Instruction with a focus on drilling. Interactive activities were close to non-existence. English learning was very much teacher-directed. He never wanted to be a teacher until having advised by his seniors. He then received his teacher training in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme offered by the University of Hong Kong (HKU), where he found a need to transform the old teaching style into new ones. He was convinced of the value of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which helps sustain students’ attention span in more collaborative work among peers, making the classroom more learner-directed. Moreover, he also took advantage of multi-media resources like YouTube clips to suit the learning style of students nowadays. His immense interest in teaching was further ignited after his first teaching practicum. In the course of his undergraduate study, he also completed two courses at a university in Brisbane, Australia where he polished his language skills.

He has now been teaching for 10 years. He does not only aim at being an English teacher but also a “tutor of life” (Interview, Nov 1, 2012). He spent his initial years of teaching at a CMI school in Ma On Shan. He is now teaching both junior and senior English at another CMI school in Tsing Yi. When asked to describe the differential teaching experience at both schools, he expressed that students in his current school were generally more disciplined and obedient.

At the time where the only interview was scheduled, he has just commenced his new academic term. He was busy preparing new materials for his students based on the Scheme of Work – which has both core and optional parts. As soon as the core part of the curriculum (of each form) is delivered, teachers can proceed to their own optional activities specially designed for elite classes which are more self-motivated.

In the interview, he brought up the idea of collaboration among colleagues a few times. According to him, colleagues always support one another in the form of lesson observations and collaborative lesson planning. Teachers’ observing one another’s lessons was not treated as a surveillance mechanism but rather a chance to give and receive constructive feedback for improvement. Such a practice has been a “culture” (Interview, 1 Nov, 2012) at his school. As for lesson planning, English teachers both of the same form and different forms always sit together to share teaching ideas and follow up on students’ progress. Alan particularly highlighted an example of collaborative lesson planning for additional English lessons. Those lessons were customised for senior students whose English proficiency was below-average. The students in this kind of remedial lesson was usually demotivated to learn. Alan drew on the regular collaborative planning with the Native English Teacher (NET) and other teachers to develop a motivating teaching package:

*... we will collaborate to design teaching materials every two weeks. So we’ll choose a hot topic. So the previous one we have chosen will be the “Gangnam Style”. (Interview, 1 Nov, 2012)*

At the time when the materials were designed, the song called “Gangnam style” – originated from a music video shot by a Korean middle-aged singer – was popular among youngsters for its weird dancing steps and catchy tunes.

Furthermore, he mentioned students’ limited exposure to English as one of the difficulties in teaching English at CMI schools. Therefore, he found it inevitable to encourage students’ own learning spontaneity in English learning:

*for the CMI schools, it's totally difficult for us [teachers in a CMI school] to cover as many things that I want using maybe six to seven lessons a week. So if the students are having good initiative on their own – they really eager to learn more English on their own, then that will be better. (Interview, 1 Nov, 2012)*

In line with his own belief, Alan, together with his colleagues, strongly encouraged their students to complete supplementary exercises on a self-access learning platform in various ways:

*We have a kind of online learning platform for them so they can do it every day. But then, you know, we have to make different rules for them. For example, we encourage them for doing it by giving them rewards and marks for their daily marks. And then, we'll force them to do. If they are not doing it, we have to ask them to come to our lunchtime session in the school. (Interview, 1 Nov, 2012)*

Another tool that Alan believes to be useful is the evaluation form. He utilised them to facilitate peer and student-to-teacher evaluation. For instance, he once administered peer evaluation forms in a speaking lesson where students were to present a product. Noting the potential difficulty of such an evaluation task, he deliberately simplified the task:

*we sometimes focus on, maybe, one or two aspects in a particular domain... For some occasions, we'll just focus on the volume or some pronunciation at one time so we will not force the students to focus on many aspects because it's quite difficult for them to do it at the same time... Then, the teacher will normally go through the areas... they have to know what areas the teacher is looking for in order to get higher marks. (Interview, 1 Nov, 2012)*

As for student-to-teacher evaluation, Alan had experimented to distribute evaluation forms to his students at the end of the academic term so that he, having made sense of the feedback, could reshape his classroom practice. Moreover, he took special caution to clarify the purpose of such an evaluation with his students in order to ensure the validity and truthfulness of their feedback. He gave an instance where he reshaped his classroom practice upon receiving those evaluation forms:

*... every time when I receive the comments, I will try to think about them... the most common feedback that I receive is that the pace of me telling our lessons may be a little bit too fast for them to catch up... instead of covering all the things... I'd rather choose maybe five out of the list that I really want to mention. (Interview, 1 Nov, 2012)*

In conclusion, locally trained, he caught up with many pedagogical trends in vogue, like CLT and teaching through multi-media resources. He had an eye to orienting the classroom practices to be more learner-directed. He has accumulated 10 years of teaching experience. At the school he was currently teaching, the Scheme of Work was not too constraining, which granted space for him to cater for learner diversity. Moreover, he applied the concept of collaboration with his colleagues to better his classroom practices. Instead of viewing English education as teacher-directed, he also encouraged and helped students to have some degree of control over their own learning in different ways such as the online learning platform and peer learning. To achieve more learner-directedness, he also drew on student-to-teacher evaluation and reshaped his classroom practices after rationalising students' constructive feedback.

#### ***4.2 Ben's story***

His initial English learning experience could be traced to his kindergarten. Although as a three-year-old child, his memory about that time was “vague” (Teaching portfolio, 18 May, 2011), he still recalled he learnt English with flash cards, English songs and copybooks. At the age of six, he entered a CMI primary school. His reading skills were acquired only by reading articles in the textbooks, which he referred to “monotonous” (Teaching portfolio, 18 May, 2011). Also, he recounted that his writing and listening skills were cultivated by doing guided writing tasks and listening to tapes accompanied with the textbook respectively. Chances to get in touch with authentic English were rare, except for speaking lessons taught by native speakers of English. He had studied at two secondary schools. The first one he went was an EMI school. He spent a total of 5 years there (from secondary (S) 1 to 5). From S 1 to 3, he believed that was the time when his English “started to really grow root” (Teaching portfolio, 18 May, 2011). At that time, his teachers conducted English lessons, with accompaniment of Cantonese, but the learning materials were English-only. The remaining two years at that school had seen more communicative tasks in English lessons, in addition to examination skill drillings. Upon S5 graduation, he was admitted to a CMI school. There, he engaged himself in “self-learning” (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012) because the teacher needed to take care of the majority of students who were weaker. However, the teacher not just neglected Ben; rather, she acted like a facilitator. In retrospect, Ben regarded this kind of self-learning as beneficial to students' learning simply because students themselves know best what they are good at and what they are going to learn. In the interview, he expressed the influence of this notion on his present teaching.

His desire to teach is driven by a sense of mission to “cultivate young minds in terms of proficiency” and to “understand what's happening in the younger generation” (Interview, 11



Nov, 2012). He is a novice teacher who has just completed his Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) (English) and B.Ed. (English Language Teaching) in the previous year in Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). His global perspectives to teach were shaped by his overseas immersion experience at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

He currently works at a Direct Subsidy School (DSS), with a keen eye to developing students' communicative competence. His classroom practices were mostly guided by the Scheme of Work, which consisted of a core and an optional part. Having accomplished the core part, he was free to move on to the optional part for which he could design his own learning tasks. One of such attempts was transforming a typical English motivating learning activity – Extensive Reading Scheme (ERS) – into a contextualised one called 'Book-talk'. Students are given freedom to choose their own readers and to use any tools to 'sell' their books to their class:

*... because my interest is definitely not their interest so I just make them choose the books they really want to read... I will allow them to use the computer, visual aids or audio aids to make the whole presentation like real and more interesting. (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012)*

As a novice, Ben did make good use of collaborative effort among colleagues to devise a more learner-centred classroom practice by exposing himself to others' ideas. For example, he and other teachers shared teaching ideas with the English language officer which came from the Education Bureau:

*We [Ben and his colleagues] come up with our ideas and send them to him. So he will talk to us and try to come up with the best curriculum that works for most students in school. (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012)*

Moreover, in collaboration with other colleagues, Ben did not just have an eye on lesson planning but on sharing about his teaching experience and feelings:

*For novice teacher, I think there are many things that they cannot control or they do not have an idea of how to control. Sometimes at school, you have a tutor and they are experienced teachers that share their experience to you. I think that is also professional development. It doesn't need any money. I think the most important thing is that the teacher should know there is some support waiting for them and let them know they are not alone. (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012)*

As mentioned earlier, his teaching was heavily impacted by the concept of "self-learning". One of such manifestations was the establishment of an educational blog. The blog was of a writing

focus and self-access by nature. Students were welcome to post their own pieces of writing. At times, Ben would give some directions for students' online entries:

*I show them the appendix concerning personality in the first term. I ask them to watch an episode of the Apprentice in class and use adjectives to describe each contestant. And then, you hate a contestant in it and they wrote how much they hate that contestant on the blog in English. (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012)*

In this extract, he showed students an episode of 'The Apprentice' (an American reality game show) in the class. Then, he guided his students to write a description for the contestants on the blog using the adjectives learnt earlier. In addition, with a view to further making students even more responsible to learn through the blog, he adopted a few extrinsically motivating strategies:

*If some of them write well, I will comment them in the class and say for those who did not write can go up to the blog, blah... blah... blah. They can learn from each other... I will praise in class not in blog. (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012)*

In assisting his students' learning, Ben found the use of feedback particularly useful. First, student-to-teacher feedback was always considered precious to reshape his classroom practices. He who treated his students as "users of my [his] teaching" (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012) gave out evaluation forms. Instead of just formally collecting written feedback, he also tried to talk to both high-achieving and low-achieving students in his class so as to cater for learner diversity:

*[After class,] I will talk to individual students, like one strong student and one weak student and ask for their needs.*

He, as a novice teacher, also capitalised on the potential of a computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool – Facebook – for reflective purposes. Facebook is an online platform on which the teacher could connect with students through both real-time and asynchronous communications:

*Some of them do talk to me on Facebook what I did wrong today... what I did good today... their feedbacks are very important for me. (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012)*

Second, he also viewed peer feedback as indispensable for his students' own sake. Through blogging (as reported before), other students could comment on one another's writing, apart from the conventional peer feedback forms during lessons. In the interview, he articulated clearly the perceived strength of peer learning:

*I think one of the good things about peer comments is that they can be brutal while ones from the teacher cannot be that brutal. Because the teacher's comments can destroy them so easily so the reason why I use peer comments is that I think they are very honest with each other so in that way they can get more realistic feedback than the teacher... It's (facilitating peer learning by administering feedback forms) like they are given control or an opportunity to really appreciate or criticise others' work. I guess they enjoy being teachers of their peers. (Interview, 11 Nov, 2012)*

When asked whether the peer feedback is constructive enough, he answered most of them were constructive, with his clear instruction given prior to the learning task.

To conclude, his English significantly improved in his junior secondary when Cantonese was also used side-by-side with English as the Medium of Instruction. Another notable influence on his teaching is his learning experience during his S6 and 7. His English teacher facilitated his self-learning of which he thought highly. At his present school, he endeavoured to make every innovative attempt to bring motivation to the classroom. For instance, he facilitated students' (peer) learning through blogging. Moreover, he treasured the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues to come up with the best approaches for students. Students' feedback was also considered indispensable for his self-reflection. As such, he collected comments from students through different media; some of which was likely to be intrinsically motivating, like Facebook. In the future, he will keep striving to cultivate young minds of the present generation.

#### **4.3 Carl's story**

In his childhood, Carl's family hammered a message into his mind – being well-educated predicts a better job – and encouraged him to gain a university degree when he grew up. He studied at a CMI primary school where English teachers taught with almost just “chalk and talk”. Onto his secondary education, he was meticulously cared by one of his English teachers at a local CMI school. She assisted Carl in overcoming difficulties in learning English and answered his questions clearly. Other English teachers at his secondary school mainly taught in a fun way so that he felt that “learning [was] without pressure” (Interview, 29 Dec, 2013). One of such fun ways, according to him, was to learn English through movies with food for thought (at the post-viewing stage). Another instance was learning grammar through interactive activities, which left happy memory to Carl. In the interview, he expressed that his teaching style was partly shaped by the approaches to learning English at his secondary school. Upon graduation, he found himself passionate about teaching. Then, he gained his B.A. (Linguistics) in the City University of Hong Kong (CityUHK). His tertiary education particularly cultivated his independent thinking abilities and put him to learn from peers. Afterwards, he received his

professional teaching qualification in a Post-graduate Diploma Education (PGDE) programme in HKBU. During the supervised teaching practice (STP), he discovered the usefulness of fun activities to motivate students' learning.

He is now a local English teacher with 6 years' experience. His formative teaching years were spent in a secondary school before teaching at another local secondary school whose students are ill-behaved and demotivated to learn when the first interview was done with him.

The English panel chair of that school required every teacher to be responsible for tailoring and teaching parts of the materials shared in the same form, according to a certain schedule stated in the Scheme of Work. Carl found it hard to follow the teaching schedule while students were lagging behind and ill-behaved. Teachers were pressurised by the panel chair if not following the schedule tightly enough. That was why he and other teachers had no choice but to teach at the expense of interactive lesson activities. Fortunately, he felt contented to work at that school because colleagues always supported one another. For example, Carl sometimes exchanged teaching ideas with his colleagues before teaching a specific unit or grammar item in order to teach more effectively. Not only did they exchange ideas during the pre-teaching and while-teaching stage, they also did "give a few words to describe the result of the lessons" (Interview, 29, Dec, 2013) to one another for reflection at the post-teaching stage.

At that school, Carl taught his students using different ways. Two noteworthy ways were reported below. First, he and his colleagues endeavoured to get their students to learn on their own through an online platform. Yet, Carl expressed the difficulty in keeping students doing the exercise despite the fact that the participation of i-Learner was worth 5% of students' total English mark. Some of his students even described the exercise as "low-b" (idiotic) (Interview, 7 Feb, 2013) and laughed at the cartoon, animation and the sound effect of the online exercise. Second, he had tried to adopt peer evaluation in his classroom practice; however, his effort was in vain because students did "not have the ability to comment on peer writings" (Interview, 29 Dec, 2013). He perceived peer evaluation as a waste of time.

In the follow-up interview, he expressed that he then works as a supply English teacher in a Band-1 government secondary school, mainly instructing highly motivated Form 1 students. Like his previous school, there was also a rigid Scheme of Work, specifying a list of to-do items for teachers. However, Carl did manage to create space for learner empowerment because the teaching sequence was not pre-defined and the English panel chair had trust in him and never asked him about the teaching progress. Carl clearly pointed out he enjoyed much professional freedom in this school comparatively. Given this flexibility and freedom, he could spare time

for learners to brew ideas on top of what they ought to learn:

*... they will feel more happy if they can have a choice. Or motivated I can say... I will add some time each lesson doing what they suggest to do. And their comments will be considered if I think is suitable.... (Interview, 7 Feb, 2013)*

He then exercised his professionalism to incorporate learners' choices which were essentially empowering and motivating into his regular teaching schedule (which was solely determined by the Scheme of Work). One of such instances is that:

*I will give them challenging questions, for example about the vocabulary... [and] it is motivating. (Interview, 7 Feb, 2013)*

Like in his previous school, colleagues were approachable and willing to answer questions from one another although there are no formal collaborative planning sessions. For improving teaching performance, there were lesson observations from his colleagues who would give constructive comments.

Furthermore, Carl also made use of different pedagogies which were deemed useless in his previous school. First, he found it useful to have students learn from peers at this school. In comparison with his previous teaching experience, he pointed out peer learning was only viable at schools like the present one where students were more disciplined and motivated. Moreover, he gave out evaluation forms to collect students' comments on his teaching for reshaping his classroom practice because he believed students are capable of giving constructive feedback. In short, his passion for teaching sparked when he was a secondary student. He also mentioned the "learning-without-pressure" learning approach has influenced his classroom practice which tended to be more fun and motivating. His university education and teacher training deepened his understanding about teaching English. In the two interviews, he revealed experiences of working in both totally different schools in terms of school culture and banding. At his former school, he found it pressurised to follow a rigid Scheme of Work while handling classroom discipline problems and catering for low-achieving students. Still, he managed to work collaboratively with his supportive colleagues. Currently working at a Band-1 school, he was required to follow closely the Scheme of Work; however, he found himself having more professional freedom there due to a flexible teaching sequence and trust from the panel chair. As a result, with colleagues' support, he could find space to make his lessons more motivating and learner-centred in a couple of ways like facilitating student-to-teacher evaluation and peer learning.

## **5 Discussion**

Following the findings, this section compares and contrasts the three stories in order to generate insightful themes for discussion, with the support of relevant literature.

### ***5.1 Teachers as agents of learner empowerment***

It is reviewed that partially empowering students is conducive to learner autonomy development (Cullen et al., 2012; Little et al., 2002). In this sense, teachers and learners are engaged in a dynamic, interdependent relationship (Little, 1995; La Ganza, 2008) where different aspects of learning (like ‘what to learn and ‘how to learn’) are constantly negotiated (Dam, 1995). In this kind of ‘joint negotiation’ (Breen & Candlin, 2001, p. 18), teachers and learners make pedagogical decisions together to co-construct a unique curriculum (Smith, 2003), resulting in increased learner control (Fisher et al., 2007).

In this study, all participants expressed that their classroom practices are mainly based on the Scheme of Work, despite a different school environment. Conducted in Hong Kong, Benson’s (2010) research found that Schemes of Work are powerful documents which specify what to cover in Hong Kong classrooms and the pace at which the lesson content is delivered and are related to many systemic constraints on teacher autonomy. The present study confirms this point – all participants are meant to accomplish the ‘must-teach’ items specified on the Scheme of Work within a designated time frame. However, it is found that the extent to which the participants are constrained by the Scheme of Work differs. Like what Benson (2010) has unveiled, although teachers in Hong Kong are constrained by the Scheme of Work, they can still create spaces for professional freedom – and in this study, the participants are shown to have effectively exercised their freedom to develop and sustain learner autonomy in their classroom practices. One of such instances is Ben’s revolutionising of a routinized activity “Extensive Reading Scheme”. Taking advantage of the flexibility granted by the Scheme of Work, he empowered his students to choose what books to learn from and hence intrinsically motivated students. His success in arousing students’ motivation is likely to help sustain autonomous learning (Reinder, 2010) in a sense that learner autonomy “is nourished by and in turn nourishes... [students’] intrinsic motivation” (Little, 2006, p. 2).

In short, the findings show that the teachers have attempted to create an autonomous classroom by internalising the existing opportunities and constraints in their teaching-learning contexts.

## **5.2 Teachers as transformers of previous educational experience**

It is interesting to note from Ben's and Carl's stories that their previous educational experiences do bear an effect on their pedagogy. This confirms a point that Little (1995) is trying to make:

*Language learners are more likely to operate as independent flexible users of their target language if their classroom experience has already pushed them in this direction; by the same token, language teachers are more likely to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to do so. (p. 180)*

In Ben's case, he experienced a change of learning environment starting from his secondary 6 – from an EMI to a CMI school. At that CMI school, the English proficiency of his classmates is not high and thus his English teacher at that time facilitated what he called “self-learning”, which he found it useful for English learning. Later in his teaching life, he narrated that he drew on students' peer learning which coincides the notion of self-learning. As for Carl's case, his secondary teachers taught him English with fun. Coupled with his revelation of the usefulness of fun activities in his teacher training, he always bears the learning-without-pressure approach in his mind when he is to teach students.

Across the two cases, it is evident that teachers' previous educational experience may directly influence their pedagogy. This research provides evidence for Little's (1995) claim made for learner autonomy development among students.

## **5.3 Teachers as reflective practitioners**

### **5.3.1 Student-to-teacher feedback**

In order to achieve learner-centredness, all teachers have demonstrated a great sensitivity to the degree of learner involvement and students' needs by virtue of some routinized techniques ranging from observing students' responses, detecting off-task behaviour to checking understanding through homework and tests. Moreover, they all drew on student-to-teacher feedback to know learner needs better from a student's perspective. An illuminating example is from Ben. Apart from collecting feedback conventionally (e.g. evaluation forms), he also drew on Facebook (a social networking site) as a platform to collect students' feedback. This may assist students in formulating more systematic ideas because they are not pressurised to give immediate face-to-face feedback (Tiene, 2000), which allows teachers to identify learner needs more clearly.

All in all, by reflecting upon such feedback as learners' voice, teachers can inform and reshape their classroom practices which attend more to students' authentic needs. This is in keeping with Reinder's (2010) cycle of autonomous learning.

Worth noting are the two personal factors that are relevant to the development learner autonomy in teachers' classroom practices. First, using their professionalism, they rationalised students' ideas with respect to the opportunities and constraints in the teaching-learning context before synthesising a reshaped classroom practice. This rationalisation requires a high degree of critical and reflective thinking which "accepts uncertainty and acknowledges dilemma" (Larrivee, 2000, p. 294). Second, they displayed an open attitude towards students' ideas and were willing to accept change as a necessity in order to tilt the existing classroom practices to be even more learner-centred, while constantly finding spaces for their own professional freedom. This is in line with Kennedy & Pinter's (2007) view that an elevated control over teaching goes hand in hand with the development of a capacity for change.

### ***5.3.2 Collaborative planning***

In Social Constructivist terms, collaboration facilitates internal and social negotiation of meaning by exposing one to novel ideas (Pinter, 2007). Eventually, it helps teachers accumulate professional knowledge and experience till reaching a stage of 'automaticity' – where teachers "demonstrate more autonomy and flexibility in both planning and teaching" (Tsui, 2003, p. 41).

In the study, all participants had experience in collaborative planning for increased learner-centredness, laying a solid cornerstone for learner autonomy development (Chan, 2000); however, the manifestation of collaboration was slightly different. Through self-negotiation and social negotiation of meaning, collaboration among colleagues facilitates exchange of learner-centred ideas for material preparation (cf. Alan's case), more effective pedagogies (cf. Ben's case) and curriculum development (cf. Carl's case). All these manifestations of collaboration bring in new ideas which result in increased professional knowledge and hence teacher autonomy (Pinter, 2007) – which is conducive to an autonomous classroom.

Moreover, collaboration does not just about co-lesson planning but also sharing of experience. As reported earlier, there are mentors for novice teachers at Ben's school. Mentors' role is to acculturate new teachers to the new teaching-learning environment through induction. In Kennedy's (2005) Coaching/ Mentoring model for continuous professional development (CPD), the role of a coach is more skill-based whereas that of a mentor orients more to the affective



aspect of teaching – with elements of “counselling and professional friendship” (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002, p. 301). Furthermore, as a novice, it is likely for Ben to encounter moments of helplessness and insecurities, as documented by Roger & Babinski (2002). In the findings, Ben expressed that his mentor provided socio-emotional support when he felt that things were not in control. Through such a process of (continuous) professional development mediated by mentoring (as a special form of collaboration), teachers’ professional knowledge is likely to grow, in turn nourishing their own teacher autonomy (Tsui, 2003).

Added to the above, from the findings, it is derived that for collaboration to work to develop teacher autonomy and a more learner-centred classroom, teachers must be placed in a highly supportive climate. In other words, a more supportive climate forms a more favourable micro-culture of the teaching environment for collaboration to be conducive to teacher autonomy development (Aoki, 2002).

#### ***5.4 Students as proactive and independent learners***

##### ***5.4.1 Self-access language learning (SALL)***

In the literature, SALL is defined as “learning in which students take more responsibility for their learning than in teacher directed settings” (Gardner & Miller, 1997, p. xvii), thus moving towards learner autonomy. Cotterall & Reinders (2001) made an endeavour to establish a logical link between SALL and learner autonomy. They are related to each other in a few ways. First, under an SALL setting, students are allowed to attain their learning goals according to individual learner differences (for example, learning pace). Second, SALL resources may encourage students to have control over their learning in aspects like setting goals. Third, SALL functions as a bridge between teacher-oriented learning (where the focus falls on study and practice of target forms) and the authentic language use in the real world (where English is deployed for communication). Last, SALL helps students who prefer learning on their own develop learner autonomy.

To realise students’ SALL, Alan and Carl encouraged students to capitalise on online learning platforms. However, Carl reported a failed attempt in facilitating SALL among students. Issues of motivation are perhaps a tentative explanation.

Before moving on to the explanation, it is insightful to first look at Ben’s use of such an educational blog as a self-access tool, there are four advantages, derived from the literature. First, writing an online entry can serve as a follow-up (or post-) task of the lesson activity. This

can enhance teachers' flexibility and autonomy in conducting the lesson in terms of time management. In the meantime, students can take their time to post their entries (which enable multiple self-corrections) according to their personal schedule. Second, students are put in a learning community in which they address one another's learner needs through "proactive partnerships" (Kearns et al., 1999, p. 62). Learning through this sort of online learning community practice, students "feel safe to experiment" (Cullen et al., 2012, p. 65) and write under a risk-free environment which is vital for self-expression, idea exchange and relationship build-up (teacher-student and student-student) (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Such a sense of 'security' is necessary with respect to students' English-Chinese interlanguage development which inevitably involves a 'trial-and-error' stage. Third, the commenting function of the blog situates teachers and learners in a highly reflective environment. All members of the learning community are free to post evaluative comments for one another's entries – in other words, student-to-teacher, teacher-to-student and peer feedback are well in place – which is conducive to critical reflection. As said earlier, this reflective component acts as an impetus for the cycle of autonomous learning (Reinder, 2010). Fourth, through extensive collaboration, learners construct their own knowledge, in socio-cultural terms, through both cognitive and motivational scaffolding (Bruckman, 2006) in terms of positive socioemotional support and interactions (Ushioda, 2007). The two types eventually lead to students' knowledge growth through negotiation of meaning which "serves the metalinguistic function of helping to internalize linguistic form" (Swain, 1995, p. 128) and enhanced intrinsic motivation (Ushioda, 2007) respectively. Making reference to La Ganza (2008)'s DIS model for autonomy, affective support from teachers is deemed momentous for learner autonomy development, just as what Dam (1995) advocates.

The focus of discussion shall fall back to the perceived failure of Carl's implementation of i-Learner. In exploring the usefulness of Ben's educational blog, it seems that Ben tended to motivate his students both extrinsically (by praising) and intrinsically (through motivational scaffolding and with authentic language use, or task authenticity). Yet, Carl mainly drew on extrinsic motivation (i.e. exam marks). This *may* suggest that students' level of intrinsic and extrinsic (as in the 'active' form) motivation affects the effectiveness of teachers' attempt to develop learner autonomy through the self-access resources. According to Ryan & Deci (2000), both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are both important in learning. However, more empirical evidence shall be needed to verify this claim, provided that the teaching-learning context in both cases is greatly different.

#### **5.4.2 Peer learning and feedback**

In conventional classrooms where teachers' dominance prevails, all evaluation tasks are conducted by teachers only. However, as the notion of learner autonomy gained its place in Hong Kong (cf. CDC & HKEAA, 2007), more teachers seep elements of peer learning into their own learner-centred classroom. In the interviews, all the participants had facilitated peer learning through the use of peer feedback (or evaluation) to develop learner autonomy which is redefined by Benson (2001) as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 47). Learning from Carl's case, peer evaluation can be problematic for some weaker students as he reported that such an evaluation was time-wasting because of students' perceived inability to give comments constructive enough for peer learning. Yet, the difficulty of peer evaluation can be mitigated by giving clearer instructions (as in Ben's case) and simplifying the evaluation task (as in Alan's case).

### **6 Conclusion**

The above chapters discussed how the teacher-participants deployed pedagogical strategies to encourage their own autonomy, learner-centredness and hence learner autonomy in classroom practices. It is found that those strategies include collecting student-to-teacher feedback, engaging in collaborative planning, and facilitating self-access learning and peer learning. Moreover, it is unveiled that some factors may influence those classroom practices. Those factors are two-fold. The flexibility of the Scheme of Work, a supportive teaching micro-culture, and students' motivational level are factors internal to the school (i.e. institutional) while a willingness to accept change and the ability to rationalise students' feedback operate on a personal level.

As constrained by the small-scale nature of this undergraduate research, this study has its limitations. The first one is related to the limited range of data sources. At the planning stage, some other data sources, like lesson observations, and sample classroom materials, were included. Regrettably, those data were not collected because the researcher had not received permission from the schools concerned. Second, there are only three informants. Even though a qualitative study should involve a smaller number of participants, three is still regarded as a small number, provided that there should be a balance between the width and breadth of a study.

Yet, in general, the researcher has endeavoured to highlight some important findings and discuss them adequately with the support of a wide range of relevant literature. There is also room for further research. For instance, it is perhaps insightful to seek participants who are considered

“expert teacher” (Tsui, 2003). The factor of teaching experience is likely to play a role in developing their own autonomy and hence learner autonomy.

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