Fostering learner autonomy within constraints: Negotiation and mediation in an atmosphere of collegiality

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ABSTRACT
In any given learning context, there are constraints on the development of learner autonomy. However, this does not mean that developing autonomy is not feasible. In this paper, I firstly describe student passivity in Bachelor of Arts Graduation Paper (BAGP) writing in a four-year BA Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program in a Chinese teachers’ university. I then present how student autonomy can be fostered within the given constraints, drawing on my own experience in supervising 15 students doing their BAGPs. I argue that possibilities for developing autonomy within these constraints depend largely on teachers’ willingness and capacity to live through a continuous process of mediation, negotiation, dialogue and personal interpretation concerning the teaching–learning content, process and environment. However, the process of negotiation and mediation for engaging autonomy should be pursued in an atmosphere of collegiality. Data used in this study were collected from interviews with students (supervisees) and teachers (supervisors) and are used in conjunction with field notes I kept over the six months during which students conducted their BAGPs.

Introduction
Learner autonomy can be broadly defined as ‘the capacity to take control of one’s own learning’ (Benson 2001: 47). In more specific definitions of autonomy, some writers emphasise learners’ ability and willingness to make choices and to take responsibility in the learning process (for example, Holec 1981; Littlewood 1996), while others recognise autonomy as a learners’ and teachers’ right (for example, Benson 2000) and relate autonomy to exploration of the self-concept, the realisation of personal and group potential, and learners having an opportunity to define their own meanings and develop them (Kenny 1993a, 1993b, 1996). Although the multi-dimensional concept of learner autonomy can be defined in various terms carrying different emphases and ideologies in different contexts at different times, my position is very much in line with the views of Kenny and
Benson – autonomy is concerned with the expression and exploration of learners’ own meanings and purposes, facilitated by a process of negotiation and mediation in an atmosphere of genuine dialogue and collegiality. Teachers often complain that they are happy with the idea of autonomy, but find it difficult or even impossible to foster autonomy in their classrooms due to various constraints. In this paper, I firstly review the literature about constraints on the development of learner autonomy in the formal educational context to explore whether and how classroom teachers can play a role in fostering learner autonomy. I then describe perceived student passivity in BAGP writing in a four-year BA TEFL program in a Chinese teachers’ university. Finally, I present suggestions on how student autonomy can be fostered within the given constraints, drawing on my own experience in supervising 15 students doing their BAGPs. The purpose of presenting this case for closer scrutiny is not to show a successful model for developing autonomy, but to provide a point of reference to invite opinions and critiques from autonomy practitioners on my views of how autonomy might be fostered in such a context.

Constraints on autonomy and teachers’ roles to support autonomy

Benson (2000: 116) summarises four categories of constraints on the promotion of learner autonomy in a given educational context:

- **Policy constraints**: broad policies on language in education.
- **Institutional constraints**: rules and regulations, certification, examinations, curriculums, the physical and social organisation of the school and classroom practices.
- **Conceptions of language**: dominant conceptions of what the target language is, and the ways in which it is organised and correct usage.
- **Language teaching methodologies**: assumptions about how languages are learned, and relevant learning resources and activities.

Compared with the first category, which is often out of teachers’ control, especially in the short term, discussion of the other three categories of constraints is more relevant to teachers and students in a specific institution. Given the various constraints on autonomy, Benson argues that the teacher’s role is to mediate between the learners’ right to autonomy and the broader constraints that inhibit the exercise of this right. To transfer control over learning decisions to the learners, the teacher should play ‘the key role of explaining and justifying these constraints to his or her learners’ (Benson
If the teacher can do this, I believe there will exist, within constraints, possibilities for the exercise of autonomy; otherwise, the teacher, who is unavoidably seen as a bridge between the learners’ right to autonomy and the socio-institutional constraints on autonomy, might run the risk of being ‘the most important constraint on the exercise of their right to autonomy’ from the learners’ perspective (Benson 2000: 116). Benson’s concern is how to ensure the learners’ right to autonomy through the teacher’s role in mediating the learning constraints, but in general learning, and autonomous language learning in particular, the teacher’s role in transforming learning constraints into learning possibilities through mediation is equally important.

Following Boud (1988), Voller (1997) characterises the teacher’s role in autonomous language learning as one of negotiation about syllabus with learners and external authorities (representatives of the educational institution, and professionals from the discourse communities to which learners are trying to gain admittance). Voller also suggests that negotiation should go beyond the syllabus, encompassing both ‘syllabus and meaning’ (Voller 1997: 109, italics in original). In the literature on autonomy, negotiation of meaning is broadly understood as negotiation of learner goals or teacher–learner agendas, classroom methodologies, teacher–learner role relationships and learning outcomes (Hall and Kenny 1988, 1995; Haughton and Dickinson 1989; Crabbe 1993; Kenny 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Little 1995; Barrett-Lennard 1997; Cotterall 1998; Aoki 1999; Breen and Littlejohn 2000; Amaro 2002; Huang 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b).

Negotiation in language learning is sometimes represented as a form of teacher–learner dialogue about learning in the classroom (Cotterall 1995; Cotterall and Crabbe 2002). This form of teacher–learner dialogue is represented as ‘pedagogical dialogue’ by Little (1995). Drawing on personal construct psychology (Kelly 1963; Bannister and Fransella 1989), Little (1995: 178) argues:

classroom learning involves an encounter between a number of personal construct systems, all of them having some things in common but each at the same time uniquely individual … there is a sense in which, whatever her subject, the teacher cannot help but teach ‘herself’. The curriculum that she presents to her learners is hers and no one else’s; however closely she may seek to follow a prescribed programme, she can only communicate her necessarily unique interpretation of it.

According to Little, this is ‘the starting point for the complex and probably protracted process of negotiation by which learners can be brought to accept responsibility for their learning’ (Little 1995: 178). It should be noted that negotiation here carries an emphasis on teachers’ personal interpretations of
the curriculum, as well as the co-production of classroom language lessons by both teachers and learners (see Allwright 1991). Based on this, Little (1995) further argues that even in a context where aims and learning targets are prescribed by a government department, and learning materials are highly structured, there is still room for the teacher to exploit possibilities for developing learner autonomy through a process of negotiation.

In summary, this brief review of the literature indicates that finding possibilities for autonomy out of various constraints on autonomy entails what Aoki (2002) terms ‘pro-autonomy’ teachers’ mediation of the learning context, teacher–learner negotiation of learner goals, learning content and classroom methodologies, and a process of genuine pedagogical dialogue. This actually links to the issue of the relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy can be defined as teachers’ willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning (Huang 2005c). It is strongly argued in the field of second/foreign language education that the development of learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy (for example, Little 1995; Benson 2000; Aoki 2002; see a review by Huang 2005c).

Teacher (and learner) autonomy should be pursued in an atmosphere of collegiality (Hall and Kenny 1995; Allwright 2003). Researchers exploring the broad issue of collegiality include Hall and Kenny (1988, 1995), Kenny (1993a, 1993b, 1996) and Barrett-Lennard (1997) on the ‘talkbase approach’ and ‘investigative research’, which emphasise the process of learning, the individual learner, authenticity in the relationship between a learner and an activity, collegiality in pursuing autonomous learning, and interdependence rather than independence for the efficient and effective management of a teaching operation; and, more recently, Allwright (2003, 2005a, 2005b) and colleagues (for example, Gunn 2003; Perpignan 2003; Wu 2005, 2006) on exploratory practice (an approach to practitioner research), where the focus is on understanding, in a collaborative mode, the quality of language classroom life and on collegiality, harmonisation and authenticity in the development of learner and teacher autonomy.

For example, Perpignan’s (2003: 261) research was conducted ‘through dialogue among the participants about the practice of dialogue’. This dialogue consists of the learners’ written text, the teacher’s written feedback and the ongoing responses from this initial exchange. Perpignan sees her research as ‘a social enterprise and a collegial process, leading to mutual development’ (Perpignan 2003: 264). She concludes that giving feedback to learners is a matter of establishing mutual trust in interpersonal relationships. Interestingly, she also notes a shift in goal in her research from a quest for
guidelines towards change and teacher effectiveness, to a quest for understanding the conditions under which effectiveness could best be achieved. In involving students in ‘investigative research’ in an eight-week intensive English for Specific Purposes program (for engineering students from Asian countries) at a postgraduate institution, Kenny’s (1993b) approach gives central emphasis to the change of learner status through releasing learners from the need to be pupils and encouraging them to be partners and investigative researchers, and through giving them an opportunity to define and express their own meanings. Kenny argues that this is one way of engaging learner autonomy. Although collegiality is not an explicit focus in Kenny’s approach, the emphasis on ‘meaning which is one’s own’ (citing Prabhu 1987) and authenticity in the relationship between the learner and the activity and between the learner and the teacher illustrates the actual contribution of collegiality to the success of the approach. In this article, I take the approach that autonomy is concerned with the expression and exploration of learners’ own meanings and purposes, facilitated by a process of negotiation and mediation in an atmosphere of genuine dialogue and collegiality.

In the remainder of this paper, I use the BAGP project at a local teachers’ university in China as a case in point to demonstrate how autonomy was constrained and how it could be fostered within the existing constraints. This raises issues of context and method, which I take up below.

**Context: External examinations, job-hunting and BAGP**

The university where this study was conducted is a local teacher-education university, where the educational system is rather examination-oriented. Throughout the four-year BA TEFL program, there were three influential external examinations. TEM-4 and TEM-8 (Test for English Majors, Band-4 and Band-8), scheduled respectively in the second semester of the second and fourth academic years, were national proficiency tests, which all English majors were supposed to take. Both proficiency tests provide status in the job market and are thus important to these prospective teachers (TEM-4 was even a prerequisite to the BA degree conferment). In addition to these two tests, there was one more influential external examination – the Postgraduate Entrance Examination – in the final year (scheduled between the end of the first semester and the beginning of the second semester). Students usually spent two years preparing for this examination and the preparation started after TEM-4. In the BA TEFL program, about 30 per cent of the fourth-year students took this examination to pursue their postgraduate studies in a university of the students’ choice after graduation.
In the second half of the first semester of the fourth academic year, students began to visit human resources assemblies for job interviews in various cities. Because of this job-hunting exercise and the Postgraduate Entrance Examination, a considerable percentage of students were absent from classes in the final semester.

In summary, the three external examinations and job-hunting exercise affected the regular TEFL curriculum to varying degrees; the administration had accommodated students’ immediate examination concerns to the extent that the implementation of the regular curriculum was substantially neglected. However, the problem of a time clash between the examinations (TEM-8 and Postgraduate Entrance Examination) and job-hunting, and the BAGP, was not easily solved. It was against this background that students were required to write a BAGP of 3000 words as partial fulfilment of the BA degree requirements. Suggested areas for the BAGP included English as a Foreign Language teaching and learning, translation, culture and English language literature. Students were assigned a supervisor towards the end of the first semester in the final year, and each final draft was examined by two teachers/supervisors. In addition, there was an oral defence for all the students, about one month before they graduated from the university.

Method
The data used in this study included interviews and field notes, collected over six months (December 2005 to May 2006), during which students wrote their BAGPs. Some of the student and teacher interviews were semi-structured, while others were unstructured to encourage more open discussion on issues that interviewees were interested in. All the student and teacher interviews were conducted in Chinese, audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim afterwards. Longer interviews (especially group interviews) took more than two hours, while the shortest ones lasted about 40 minutes.

INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS/SUPERVISEES AND TEACHERS/SUPERVISORS
After students had passed their oral defence in late May 2006, I invited volunteers to attend interviews focusing on how students had managed to complete their BAGPs, including their own experiences, difficulties encountered, strategies to cope with difficulties, supervisor–supervisee relationship, BAGP management, and suggestions for the administration, supervisors and students themselves. Six group interviews (altogether 28 students, with three to six in each group) and two individual interviews were conducted. These 30 students were supervised by 13 teachers.
I conducted interviews with six teachers in two groups and 13 individual teachers from March to July 2006, when students were in the process of writing their BAGPs and after students had passed their oral defence. Questions discussed were related to issues covered in student interviews.

FIELD NOTES
I kept notes of staff meetings and incidental, informal conversations with colleagues and students on campus. Other ongoing notes included email correspondence with the fourth-year students, especially the 15 students who conducted their BAGPs with me. These notes were kept in either English or Chinese depending on the circumstances.

A grounded approach to data collection and data analysis (for example, content analysis) was adopted. These various forms of data helped me gain an in-depth understanding of the context and made possible a discussion on a wide range of issues concerning student and teacher autonomy in the BAGP project. Two issues are examined below before I present how student autonomy can be fostered within the given constraints: student passivity in BAGP and difficulties in failing a student in BAGP.

Student passivity in BAGP
Students were assigned supervisors towards the end of the first semester in the final year and were urged to start preparation for the thesis writing scheduled in the second (final) semester as soon as possible by doing exploratory reading and identifying a research topic. However, not many students were engaged in this process. Students tended to wait for supervisors to push them to meet a series of deadlines at different stages – for example, identifying a topic and outlining, and submitting initial, revised and final drafts.

What accounted for the insufficient student initiatives in BAGP? One major reason was probably that in the process of BAGP writing, students needed to prepare for TEM-8 and were busy with job-hunting. In the interviews, I asked students to make a comparison between TEM-8 (and TEM-4 taken in the second year) and BAGP: almost all the students interviewed stated that either examination was ‘of course more important’ to them. Students’ differentiated attitudes and their ways of investing their time and efforts in the two examinations and thesis-writing were understandable or even justifiable in our context where both examinations affected their job prospects. According to the students, few employers were interested in their thesis-writing grades, but almost all the employers they met emphasised TEM-4 and TEM-8 grades.
Most students interviewed admitted that they did not participate actively in the BAGP project (in their words, ‘not really’ or ‘just so-so’). According to them, most of their classmates were not active participants, either. They knew from the students in previous years that no student failed, even though the administration and supervisors were not happy with the overall quality of BAGPs and the students’ passive response to the BAGP.

A student, who had passed the Postgraduate Entrance Examination and was considered as a good student, said that passing the examination was the end of university study and nothing else was really important (numbered extracts hereafter were English translation of interview transcripts unless indicated otherwise; ‘HJ’ stands for the author, while ‘S’ and ‘T’ below refer to ‘student’ and ‘teacher’).

**EXTRACT 1**

HJ: But your university study doesn’t end until you get your BA degree. And there is one full semester and you need to do your BAGP.

S1: Yes, it’s wrong to think that way, but …

HJ: You aren’t worried you’ll fail in your BAGP?

S1: Well … yes, sometimes [laugh].

HJ: But if you are worried, why don’t you put in enough time in your BAGP?

S1: [Laugh] People say teachers usually don’t fail us.

HJ: Where did you hear about this?

S1: It seems everyone says so … They say some teachers are very strict and ask you to revise your paper five or six times, but they will pass you eventually.

HJ: So you get all the information before you do your BAGP? Do you know the pass grade?

S1: I don’t know, but we have also heard people in other universities say that BAGP is not important … [S1 then told a story about this].

This particular case was interesting, as the student would need to do research in the future postgraduate program and BAGP could be a useful chance for practice. However, S1 continued:

**EXTRACT 2**

S1: It seems that the purpose of study is just for taking examination.

HJ: Can you explain why?
S1: [Laugh].
HJ: Why do we only study for examinations?
S1: Oh … a kind of habitual thinking.

This conversation illustrates that learners’ conceptions of learning and goal-setting affected their involvement in activities that did not lead to immediate achievement from their perspectives. Therefore, the promotion of learner autonomy should start with negotiation of goals, but negotiation should be initiated by teachers in such an examination-oriented context where learner voices were often silenced.

Student passivity was also a result of undesirable relationships and ineffective ways of communication (for example, in giving and receiving feedback) between supervisees and supervisors. A group of students supervised by a Chinese teacher showed me their drafts with brief written comments by their supervisor. I found similar remarks (in Chinese) like ‘take your BAGP seriously’ and ‘revise this part’ in every draft. Students said that they did not know what was wrong, as the supervisor only raised problems without explanation. And according to the students, they ‘took the BAGP very seriously’. When I asked whether job-hunting substantially affected their BAGP writing, their answers were a surprise to me, such as the following:

EXTRACT 3

S1: Actually our major problem is not job-hunting. Communication with our supervisor is the greatest obstacle. We are afraid of seeing her, as she always reprimands us. She only says, ‘This is not good, and that is not acceptable!’, but she never tells us why. We are very scared and don’t know what to do.

In addition to the above comment, other factors were also influential in BAGP writing from students’ perspectives, such as little training in academic writing and basic research skills, lack of explicitness in BAGP requirements and criteria set by the administration (see Extract 4 below), no freedom to choose supervisors, doubts about supervisors’ expertise and limited library resources. In the following, I turn to teachers’ views towards student passivity in BAGP.

Difficulties in failing a student in BAGP

TEACHER AUTONOMY AT RISK

The greatest difficulty that teachers encountered in exercising their professional freedom was to make a decision to pass or fail a BAGP that did not meet the pass standard. And teachers generally thought that if they could
not fail poor-quality theses and lazy, ‘indifferent’ writers who showed little concern about the basic thesis-writing requirements, students would not pay serious attention to thesis writing and would not engage themselves actively in this process. The following extract illustrates the constraints on teachers exercising their professional freedom:

**EXTRACT 4**

At today’s staff meeting to set standards and formats for BAGP, supervisors were urged to note matters concerning an external evaluation on the university in the following year. Then there was a shift of focus, quite naturally. Supervisors were keen to know and asked repeatedly what’s the minimum mark to enable students to get the BA degree: jige (pass, or 60 out of 100), zhongdeng (a good pass, or 70 of 100) or lianghao (very good, 80 out of 100)? Many said the degree-guaranteed grade was zhongdeng last year, so they wanted to know whether there would be any change this year. Finally the answer was found in a university document distributed recently: zhongdeng. Another interesting thing was the administration of GP [graduation paper]: only when students had made a lot of complaints in the university’s website (BBS), did the department call a meeting to set the overall format and standard (length of abstracts, order of English and Chinese abstracts, English and Chinese within-text and end references, etc) [Field notes 2006, in English].

First of all, this incident (and my experiences as an insider in the context) revealed that careful planning of BAGP was not on the administration’s agenda. More importantly, the message conveyed to the teachers/supervisors was that departments should try their best not to fail students. One important concern underlying this message was that there would be a gate-keeping evaluation of the overall academic strength of the university, and students’ grades on the thesis writing (being an important component of evaluation) would affect the outcome of the coming evaluation. However, supervisors were generally not happy about this imposition. Therefore, remarks like the following were common: ‘If I am expected to pass a student sooner or later, why should I bother to make life difficult if my decision doesn’t matter eventually?’

While most teachers opted for the quiet life, some teachers intended to challenge the minimum 70 marks requirement:

**EXTRACT 5**

HJ: In an interview with students today, they said they expected teachers to give them pressure to push them forward with their BAGPs.

T1: Pressure alone doesn’t solve the problem. There is something wrong with the administration, because we have to pass students who
produce rubbish. In my group [6 supervisees], I gave two students respectively 64 and 65, but XX said he couldn't give very higher marks to upgrade students to 70 or plus [each BAGP was evaluated by two teachers but the supervisor's evaluation counted more]. If students can't get 70 and commit suicide, will they find fault with me? I am a bit scared … I think I need to adjust my marks.

T1 gave in eventually, overburdened by the intended option for professional freedom. Interestingly, this reveals another worry on the part of teachers: if the student really does something serious due to something like this (which is not rare in Chinese universities), what would happen to the supervisor, the department and the university?

OTHER DIFFICULTIES
Other difficulties existed when teachers tried to make a decision to fail or pass a student. First, my interviews, informal conversations with teachers/supervisors and my observation revealed that teachers were generally sympathetic to students doing the last task to secure the BA degree to increase their chances of finding a job in the following months. In doing so, they had also avoided possible trouble – for example, student resentment or repeated time-consuming supervision work on the teacher's part. Second, teachers tended to believe that many students did not actually have the ability to write the BA thesis due to little training in academic writing and basic research methods, and language difficulties (see Huang 2005b). Quite a few teachers interviewed said that conducting research and writing academic papers in English was difficult for them as well. Third, teachers felt that there was very little coordination of work regarding what students and teachers should do at what particular stages (see Extract 4). Taking all these complex reasons into account, teachers felt that it was not easily justifiable to fail a student who did poorly in BAGP.

Promoting student autonomy in BAGP
Bringing students' and teachers' views together, it seems clear that difficulties in failing poor student work (limited professional freedom) constituted one of the major constraints on students' active involvement and use of autonomy in BAGP. To develop learner autonomy, teachers needed to negotiate their own autonomy with the administration and not to overestimate the administrative control over their freedom to pass or fail students. However, it should be noted that the use of teacher or institutional power itself to fail students might be problematic when students had to face so many competing priorities (for example, influential examinations, job-hunting
and BAGP) and various contextual constraints (for example, little training in academic writing in the current curriculum implementation, poor BAGP management, undesirable relationship and ineffective communication between supervisors and supervisees, and supervisors’ expertise problems). But, based on my observation in the past years, threatening to fail students who deserved it did force them to take BAGP more seriously; however, it did not necessarily help them take more initiative in the project and greater control over the BAGP process. Rather, what is shown above points to the importance of negotiation of learner and teacher goals and expectations, and mediation of constraints and requirements, initiated by teachers (as students’ voices were often silenced in the examination-oriented context).

In this section, I use my own experience in supervising 15 students from December 2005 to May 2006 to demonstrate how learner autonomy can be fostered through a process of negotiation and mediation (for example, Little 1995; Voller 1997; Benson 2000) in a broad context of collegiality and a general approach of investigative research (see especially Kenny 1993b; Hall and Kenny 1995; Barrett-Lennard 1997; Allwright 2003; Perpignan 2003).

NEGOTIATION AND MEDIATION

Realising that getting learners to embark on an unfamiliar, time-consuming task like BAGP, especially in the face of competing priorities such as TEM-8, the Postgraduate Entrance Examination and job-hunting, may result in anxiety or even resistance, I was ready to take students’ immediate concerns and prevailing priorities into consideration in the negotiation of learner goals, working schedules, ways of communication and supervision with each individual supervisee.

It could be argued that the students’ decision to aim for simply passing their theses without really attempting to reach a high level of quality might represent an instance of the students’ control over their priorities in learning. And this in turn could be an instance of student autonomy. Therefore, a requirement of students’ investment of time and effort in maintaining quality of BAGPs might constitute a constraint upon students’ right to autonomy (prioritising TEM-8 and job-hunting rather than BAGP). It was exactly where the supervisor needed to mediate between students’ free option for their own priorities and institutional requirements for BA degree conferment (BAGP).

The simple thing to start with was holding open discussion with students to explain and justify the BA conferment requirement. Meanwhile, I discussed with students about how to make personal choices and exercise time management to make all these activities part of their agendas, with
emphasis on a particular activity at a particular time. I made it clear that they had the right to choose where to invest relatively more time and effort to do something relatively better without sacrificing other activities altogether. This was really hard at the beginning, but the openness for sharing views towards issues of students’ concerns, and the willingness to negotiate expectations and a mutually agreed working schedule with each individual student, helped establish mutual trust between students and myself. It was surprising to note how quickly students began to draw concurrent plans for these several activities. They kept me informed and sought my agreement when they intended to leave for job interviews. This was already a success in comparison with students in other groups, who were usually away for job-hunting for several weeks without notifying anyone (a major source of teachers’ complaints). When the BAGP project was accomplished, students invited me to dinner to show their appreciation for my willingness to negotiate. This was an ordinary incident, but I took it as testimony to another success in getting learners actively involved in the academic activity. My supervisees told me on different occasions that they were generally satisfied with this ‘negotiation approach’ because it helped them learn how to take control over their busy lives (personal autonomy) in the final semester. One of them said in an interview:

EXTRACT 6

S2: Looking back at the past few months, the most valuable thing I have done is that I have learned how to manage to do several things at the same time. At the beginning, I thought I would just want to pass BAGP, as finding a job was really important. I am now so happy that I can do more than that with your help and suggestion.

As an insight into the general negotiation approach that we adopted, I would like to argue that it is not realistic to try to negotiate the learning process until the learning goals have been negotiated and some common ground established between what teachers want and what learners want. This also facilitates a change of learner status (treating adult learners as partners rather than ‘pupils’), which I return to in the course of the article.

NEGOTIATION AS PEDAGOGICAL DIALOGUE

As noted earlier, negotiation is a kind of pedagogical dialogue (Little 1995) and concerned with teachers’ personal interpretations of the curriculum. First of all, the promotion of students’ initiatives in BAGP writing entailed supervisors’ personal, creative interpretation of what a student research paper should be like.

In our context, interpretations of BAGP often represented a traditional
and narrow view. That is, students were expected to write about topics that teachers thought were important (position/theoretical papers that were not built upon students’ interests and personal relevance). To give students a chance to find meanings of their own, in a collaborative mode (to reduce task difficulty), I tried to involve several students simultaneously (forming a group) in small-scale classroom research projects. The working principles were similar to that of ‘investigative research’ and ‘talkbase approach’ demonstrated by Kenny (1993b), Hall and Kenny (1995) and Barrett-Lennard (1997). Since our student teachers would soon become primary or secondary school teachers, they found classroom research highly relevant to their future professional development.

In the first few weeks, when students did exploratory reading, we held group discussions and reached the common understanding that we could conduct small-scale research on primary and secondary school teaching and learning, as well as university learning (things happening around us, based on our own experiences). We soon came to realise, surprisingly, that many topics that were closely concerned with students’ current learning were not touched upon by student writers in the previous years (see Appendix for some of the topics). I therefore encouraged students to consider focusing on these topics to discover their own meanings in writing their BAGPs. In comparison, if students chose topics concerning primary and secondary school teaching, they could use their connections with primary and secondary schools that they had established during their teaching practicum conducted before BAGP to collect classroom data. All these helped distinguish this group of students from most other students who wrote their theses without any primary data and a clear personal purpose.

In summary, the advantages of involving students in classroom research, which led to their final research reports (BAGPs), included at least three points: (1) students gained an initial understanding of some basic classroom research methods (for example, class observation, interviews and questionnaires) and learned how to identify a focus for their own papers through discussions with me and peers (students could focus on different issues in the same classroom); (2) students learned how to write short research reports by following a process approach (brainstorming ideas based on multiple data, writing parts of their reports at different stages and combining parts to whole papers, co-reviewing and co-editing); and (3) most importantly, students learned to take initiative in and responsibility for their own learning through an extended period of teacher–student and student–student collaboration.
BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF COLLEGIALITY

As shown above, necessary accommodation of students’ prevailing concerns and genuine negotiation of learner goals and working schedules enabled students to feel that they were respected and treated as equals. In conversations, I often heard students say: ‘Supervisors should be strict with us so that we can learn, but at the same time we hope they could understand us.’ In practice, I found that writing and supervising a BAGP could be treated as ‘a mutually beneficial enterprise of working together towards understanding something of common interest’ (Allwright 2003: 131).

To enhance mutual understanding and collegiality, there should be a change to the traditional ‘pupil status’ (Kenny 1993b). I started with the simple practice of asking what concerned students most in writing their BAGPs and what they expected me to help them with. At the very beginning, almost all 15 students expected me to give authoritative opinions on their initial topics. While I deliberately delayed making evaluative comments, I encouraged students to develop a sense of confidence and authority by writing something that was relevant to their lives and by exploring these issues in ways that were under their control (for example, collecting data through routine talks with classmates, sharing experiences to gain an understanding of the topics, and administering simple, open-ended questionnaires and doing thematic analysis). Through changing ‘pupil status’ and conducting ‘investigative research’, they gained a sense of authenticity and found meanings of their own, which were of primary importance in engaging learner autonomy (Kenny 1993b).

Providing supervision, like giving written feedback to learners in academic writing in Perpignan’s (2003) study, was crucially a matter of establishing mutual trust in interpersonal relationships. In the BAGP program, one of the greatest difficulties for supervisors and students was in giving and responding to feedback. I usually gave detailed feedback, made direct corrections sometimes and gave reasons for my major suggestions. However, I found that students did not respond well to my feedback and corrections. I felt quite annoyed at the beginning, but I quickly realised that this was a ‘puzzle’ to be investigated (Allwright 2003). Instead of reprimanding students for not following my comments, I stepped back to explore with them the reasons. Opinions varied: some thought that a certain usage was right; some took my advice, but did not know how to respond properly due to their current knowledge level; some admitted their bad habits of carelessness and thoughtlessness; some said that they were reluctant to remove a section on which they had spent time.

By going through such a simple but genuine scrutiny of a puzzle, we
understood each other better and gradually found appropriate ways to deal with feedback. My experiences, and those of colleagues, demonstrate that simply giving orders like ‘do this’ or ‘change that’ was unhelpful. Sharing our power with students and working for understanding of common phenomena were beneficial to the students’ acceptance of taking responsibility for their own learning. In other words, what seemed to motivate the students was the seriousness accorded to their ideas, as well as the nature of the feedback given (compare Extract 3). The ‘genuine puzzle’ negotiated together (dialogue) was far more effective than one-way announcements and evaluations (monologue).

To promote autonomy, bringing all people (not just students but colleagues and the administration as well) together in an atmosphere of collegiality was essential. Not being able to establish regular contacts and dialogues with all the colleagues, I began with colleagues who seemed to have greater genuine interest in improving students’ research work. During the six months for BAGP and afterwards, I had numerous talks with five Chinese supervisors and three foreign teachers. We exchanged views on our way home, in the lecture building and over the telephone. We shared each other’s difficulties and puzzles, we listened to stories of students and ourselves, we learned from each other, and we grew as supervisors. In addition, I held discussions with the administration, reporting difficulties and constraints faced by students and teachers, but at the same time recognising the administration’s efforts in promoting involvement and engagement of different parties (as we should know that the administration was not free of constraints). I found that the administration was not as unwilling to make necessary changes as reported by other teachers. Actually, after the BAGP, many of our suggestions were adopted to make BAGP a more relevant event for both students and supervisors in the next batch – 2003 students currently at the end of their third year (for example, early mapping of supervisors and supervisees, more detailed and explicit explanation of requirements and pass standards, establishing coordination, better scheduling and advocacy of a general negotiation approach).

**Conclusion**

Learner autonomy is an educational goal, but there is no easy way to autonomy. In any learning context, there might exist many constraints on fostering autonomy, although in this article I only have space to describe some of the major constraints, which were related to examinations, teacher–student role relationships and interaction, and the general working atmosphere and environment of an institution. Possibilities for developing
autonomy within these constraints depend largely on teachers’ willingness and capacity to live through a continuous process of mediation, negotiation and personal interpretation concerning the teaching–learning content, process and environment, especially when the institution was not fully ready for the promotion of learner autonomy, and learners’ voices were often silenced in such a context.

This paper supports Kenny’s argument that learner autonomy is ‘partly a matter of learners having an opportunity to define their own meanings and develop them’ (Kenny 1993b: 217). However, the expression and exploration of meanings and purposes should be pursued in an atmosphere of collegiality, in which teachers involved agree upon and are committed to a common approach (more a goal than reality in the current study), while teachers and students aim for mutual trust and development in their collaborative efforts to work for understanding the circumstances and ‘something of common interest’ using normal classroom activities as investigative tools (see Allwright 2003). Although only some of the teachers and learners were involved in this collegial process for autonomy in the current study, its success as an initial attempt seemed to indicate its potential for developing teacher and learner autonomy.

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REFERENCES


Appendix

SOME INTERESTING AREAS OF RESEARCH CONCERNING CURRENT UNIVERSITY LEARNING

Student perceptions of important activities/projects:
- Students’ views towards the usefulness of (1) graduation paper writing, (2) teaching practice and (3) taking courses (especially theoretical courses).
- Student perceptions of TEM-4, TEM-8, and the Postgraduate Entrance Examination.
- Why do some students say that they have learned ‘nothing’ or ‘very little’ within a course or a relatively long period of time?
- Exploring student teachers’ priorities in the fourth year: What are considered as important and unimportant.

BA TEFL program and learning to teach:
- Program evaluation: effectiveness / ineffectiveness of our BA TEFL program in teacher preparation, or opportunities / difficulties existing within the BA TEFL program in the process of learning to teach.
- Impact of the BA TEFL program on teaching practice.
- Do TEFL student teachers learn to teach in the university (before they graduate)? How? For example, can private tuition play a role in learning to teach?

Learning to teach in the first or second year:
- A case study of one or several in-service teachers graduated from the English Department of Zhanjiang Teachers University, and its implications for current education.
- A more general investigation.

Others:
- Difficulties in EFL learning among first-year students: (1) TEFL students; (2) students specialised in Business English.
- Developmental characteristics of students throughout the four years.