Constraints on Language Teacher Autonomy: A Grounded Theory

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Introduction

Theory-driven studies on teacher autonomy may inculcate the idea of language teacher autonomy without any teaching constraints. This is unlikely in all but the most ideal circumstances. Thus there is an urgent need to investigate constraints on teacher autonomy if we are to engage successfully in pedagogy that utilizes teacher autonomy. To this end, this data-driven study aims at theoretically sampling and theorizing experienced EFL teachers' perspectives to uncover constraints on language teacher autonomy. The constant comparative technique and the analytic schemes of grounded theory were used to iteratively collect and analyse interview data.

This study is significant in that it gives voice to the oft-silenced group who are often at the consumer end of reform initiatives in education systems. To this end, the study is conducted *with* not *on* teachers. Theorising from teachers' voice, the study will shed some light on the rhetoric and research of language teacher autonomy. Moreover, the study is especially significant in that it is a shift away from theory-first research approaches which aim at improving teachers' work to a data-first mode of inquiry that aims at helping researchers and theorists improve their work through insights gained from theorizing teachers' views. In less technical terms, the study is significant since it provides an insiders' view of the language teaching constraints for researchers and theorists, who are typically outsiders to the actual process of teaching but aim at theorizing language teacher autonomy.

Language Teacher Autonomy: Rhetoric and Practice

Language teachers' professional life can be described at two levels: at the level of rhetoric and at the level of practice. At the level of rhetoric teachers can

be described as reflective practitioners who are granted the right to: (1) be free from control as well as actual freedom from control (Benson, 2000); (2) make choices concerning one's own teaching (Aoki, 2000); (3) develop appropriate teacher skills, knowledge, and attitudes for oneself in cooperation with others(Smith, 2000); (4) exercise professional freedom (McGrath, 2000); (5) cultivate a good environment for learners so that they acquire and practice the knowledge autonomously (Hui, 2010); (6) manage knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the students' acquisition of a language (Hui, 2010); and (7) develop learner autonomy (Munoz, 2007).

At the level of practice teachers are at best taken as expert technicians whose main professional expertise consists of applying externally produced knowledge rather than producing local, self-generated knowledge. While in theory teachers are allowed to manage knowledge, in practice educational knowledge is often constructed without the direct participation of teachers. In effect, language pedagogy is nothing more than telling teachers what they should do and think. As Smyth (1987) puts it, "The notion that there are some groups who are equipped through intelligence and training to articulate what another group *should do and think*, is an anti-educational view" (p. 6). While self-regulating their actions and behaviors, teachers, as members of a larger organization, are usually highly committed to the common good of the organization. In many countries and schools, teachers have little autonomy, as the system remains centralized, competitive, and bureaucratic. Critics of accountability and prescriptive instructional policies argue that these can narrow teachers' professional autonomy, discourage effective teaching, and focus on lower order learning opportunities (Jiménez Raya, 2007). Being at the consumer end of educational reform, teachers may see teacher autonomy as just one more imposition coming from above them which they are supposed to, somehow, implement (Bobb-Wolff, 2007).

Most proposals in the autonomy literature are so de-politicized that we run the risk of seeing pedagogy for autonomy merely as one methodological trend among others, rather than a value-laden choice (Vieira, 2006), especially through an emphasis on the psychological and methodological aspects of autonomy and overlooking its ideological underpinnings and implications (see Benson 1997). These proposals inculcate the idea that teachers teach in a vacuum. In practice teachers do not just teach; rather they teach in a social context. As salaried employees, they should comply with a set of organizational and social givens

that constrain their autonomy. Thus, rather than being in urgent need of more elaborate theories of autonomy that specify what language teacher autonomy entails, the field of language teacher education is in urgent need of data-first studies that aim at exploring and uncovering the conditions that constrain teacher autonomy since it is through identifying and improving the conditions that constrain teacher autonomy in varied contexts that the field can cultivate language teacher autonomy.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to uncover the constraints on teachers' work through interviewing experienced language teachers who are willing to share their experience with the researcher. More specifically, it aims to (1) describe teachers' action, (2) relate teachers' action to its underlying conditions, and (3) predict the consequences of this mode of action. In other words, the study aims at developing a grounded theory of language teachers' action which has descriptive, explanatory, and predictive power in Iranian public high schools.

Research Method

Participants

Theoretically relevant data were collected through interviews with six experienced language teachers willing to share their experience and views with the researcher. They were all selected from different high schools in Shiraz, a major city located in the eastern parts of the country. All of them were from urban areas. They were all male with more than 12 years of teaching experience. All of them majored in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). Two of them had earned their master's degree and the others had earned their bachelor's degree. They were selected on the basis of their teaching experience and their willingness to share their views with the researcher because "understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with one that challenges our understandings" (Schwandt, 1999, p. 458). On ethical grounds, early in the study the participants were ensured that the final report will reflect their pseudonyms rather than their real names.

Data Collection

Since the researcher wanted to enter the field with no preconceptions, the study began with the general question, "Are there any conditions in your work place that may possibly constrain your professional autonomy?" Following Glaser (2001), initial interviewing was a process of passive listening so as not to impose any pre-suppositions. Having analyzed initial data, the researcher posed more focused questions to collect theoretically relevant data. That is, instead of collecting data to answer pre-specified questions, the researcher aimed at corroborating in subsequent interviews emerged concepts and categories from an analysis of initial interviews. More specifically, once a constraining factor was uncovered, participants were asked to elaborate on how, when, why and that condition constrained their autonomy. Thus, instead of asking new questions in subsequent interviews, the researcher aimed at increasing the breadth and depth of emerged concepts and categories for the participants. However, instead of imposing emerged concepts and categories on the incoming data, the researcher constantly renamed and changed umbrella terms, i.e. concepts and categories to accommodate diversity in the data. Interviews varied in length from thirty minutes to one hour. All in all, fifteen hours of interview data were iteratively audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed to conceptualize participants' views.

Data Analysis

The heart of data analysis in grounded theory is based on three types of coding procedures: open, axial, and selective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In open coding, the researcher tried to read transcripts, highlight critical instances, and turn these instances into concepts which maximally describe and summarize them. This process is similar to turning students' scores into an arithmetic mean to describe classroom performance on a test. Having identified concepts and categories, the researcher worked through transcripts to collect numerous illustrative quotes. Open coding resulted in summarizing and classifying participants' views. In axial coding, the researcher refined categories, amalgamated some, made connections between the categories, and expanded the categories in terms of their properties. Finally, selective coding led to the emergence of the core category, a conceptualisation which had the analytic power to pull together all the conditions that constrained teacher autonomy.

Trustworthiness

The researcher's extensive experience as a language teacher for 10 years working under the same conditions as the participants provided him with theoretical sensitivity to sift through the data and identify the prominent categories. Having determined the prominent concepts and categories, the researcher reviewed an unmarked transcript, to see if any new concepts or categories emerged, and also to see if the identified categories made sense within the general context of the interviews. Thus, the building blocks of the theory were developed through the constant comparative techniques of grounded theory. The final conceptualization, including all concepts and categories as well as the core category, was verified through member checking, which is showing the final conceptualization to the participants to approve its credibility.

Limitations

Despite the participants' validation of the emerged concepts and categories and the researcher's attempts to triangulate the data against official documents, readers should proceed with caution as they read the findings. Qualitative researchers are instruments for gathering data, and as human beings, they bring with them their own constructions of the world. Despite methodological rigor, however, findings such as these are not a guarantee of truth, for truths are always partial (Clifford, 1986), and knowledge is "situated" (Haraway, 1988). We also cannot ignore how interviewer and interviewee negotiate face or manage impressions in interviews (Goffman, 1959). An interview is but a snapshot in time. Much is left unsaid about events and persons despite the intention of the interviewer to provide a holistic account. Of course, more interviews and stories would deepen our understanding of this exploratory study. Still, the researcher is confident that the categories identified represent a subset of a larger set of macro-structures constraining language teachers autonomy in public high schools in Iran.

Results

Summary of the Theory

The constant comparative technique, theoretical sampling, and the analytic schemes of grounded theory yielded *teaching as a determined act* as the core

theoretical category. Not only does this conceptualization *describe* teaching, but also it relates this mode of action to the constraints that bring it about (explanation) and the consequences of accepting this conformist approach (prediction). First, *binding directives and circulars* specify a set of permissible actions. These sets of actions are then naturalised as good practice through *teaching teams*, the *teacher evaluation scheme*, and the *teacher promotion scheme*. These conditions turn language teaching from an autonomous act into a determined act. Accepting these conditions entails *deskilling* since language teachers don't use their knowledge and skills and over time lose control of the processes and tasks they felt responsible for as teachers (Kelchtermans, 2005). Challenging these constraints, on the other hand, entails *marginalization*. What follows is a detailed elucidation of the theory.

Binding Directives and Circulars

Directives and circulars—teaching and testing prescriptions issued by the central agency—suppress creativity in teaching and overemphasise convergent teaching by imposing uniform conditions on teachers working under totally varied conditions. When central agencies impose a strong sense of what teachers should be doing, then there is no space for teachers to reflect on their practice to improve it. They see themselves at the consumer end of educational initiatives.

Top-down policies and initiatives inculcate the idea that others' knowledge is superior to teachers' own knowledge. Once they are issued, the principal imposes them on teachers' work. Under such conditions teachers feel excluded in educational decisions. They see their role as following the directives instead of being directed by professional knowledge and experience. In the comment below, Omid cogently explained how directives shape his practice:

> Directives are license for action, just like the driver's license. If you are the best driver but you don't have the license you can't drive. On the other hand, having a driver's license allows you to drive even though you don't have the potential to drive. Likewise, we cannot teach without following the directives. Following the directives, one can teach without having the practical knowledge of teaching since he or she is following the directives rather than knowledge and experience.

Directives have a similar meaning for Ali. He believes that good teaching involves being aware of and understanding the meaning of directives:

> We must follow educational directives and circulars issued by the central bureau of education. If we do otherwise, we will be questioned. For the principal of this high school, a good teacher is the one who heeds directives, understands them, and implements them.

These comments clearly indicate that teaching is externally controlled. But control is not limited to teaching. Testing is likewise controlled by those outside the education circle. Hamid's comments illuminate the teacher's role in testing:

> I must test as the testing scheme dictates. Every year a mandated national testing scheme is sent to teachers. It clearly specifies the how and what of testing. Little divergence from the instructions entails being reproached by the colleagues, students, and principal. Convergence with the scheme, on the other hand, guarantees voice and popularity. Thus, I follow their initiatives and I am rewarded for acting in tune with their prescriptions and proscriptions.

Teaching Teams

Within each high school, teachers are divided in to teaching teams of around five to ten people. Teaching teams are appointed a formal leader. Every teaching team holds regular meetings, usually once a month, where work is planned and monitored. Within the teaching team the teachers are involved in each other's teaching. This means that teachers can no longer isolate themselves from their colleagues and decide completely on their own as to where, when, and how teaching will be done.

The organisational division to which the teachers are subjected implies a commitment to the teaching team to which one belongs. It is no longer possible for teachers to isolate separate themselves and decide how to teach. It is no longer up to the individual teacher to determine the structure and content of the class, and decisions are instead made within the teaching team to which one belongs. Hence, adaptability is important. The head teacher acts in tune with the top-down directives and circulars and directs teaching teams towards top-down policies and agendas. Instead of focusing on individual teachers' creativity and initiatives, teachers are all forced into compliance with circulars and directives so that

nearly all teachers act and think in the same way. The individual teacher becomes subject to closer scrutiny, primarily by his or her head teacher. Reza's complaints demonstrate how teaching teams and head teachers shape teachers' practice:

> In teaching teams the head teacher decides. His decisions are in line with top-down initiatives. The head teacher rewards language teachers who follow the circulars and directives rather than the teachers who follow their own plans of action.

Similarly Omid complains that his teaching is no longer in line with his own professional views. Rather it is the perspectives of the head teacher and his colleague that shape his teaching. His response reveals that he does not consent with this scenario:

> The head teacher has a managerial function rather than an educational one because he reinforces conformity rather than teachers' personal approach. You have to change many times over the years and re-assess your own values. Take up new positions, from different standpoints. And it's important to be able to see how other teachers think in teaching teams. You are a good teacher to the extent that your teaching complies with that of your colleagues. There is a stigma attached to any divergence from accepted norms. What is promoted in teaching teams is normal teaching rather than creative, responsive teaching.

Teacher Evaluation Scheme

Teacher evaluation has a control function in that teachers, who know they are being evaluated, are always conscious of the consequences of their actions. They are thus less likely to violate norms designed to sustain the efficiency agenda that defines teaching success in term of students' pass rate in the final exam. The institutional arrangements and evaluation scheme makes even the most able and intellectual teachers tone down their teaching to the level of the approved acts. Evaluation is dead and deaf to teaching as a professional activity because teachers of all school subjects are evaluated by one and the same scheme. Interviews show that dedicated teachers who try to improve their practice are severely dissatisfied with the evaluation scheme. Rather than measuring teachers' professional knowledge and skills, the scheme measures their conformity

with rules and regulations. Ahmad's concise and precise comment on the scope of the evaluation scheme better reveals its hidden agenda:

> The teacher evaluation scheme measures factors such as punctuality, clothes, teachers' conduct in the classroom, and observation of educational norms. Thus, rather than motivating teachers to excel, it forces them to be normal. The items in the scheme do not measure one's professional expertise. Rather they measure the extent to which one adapts to prescriptions and proscriptions imposed on teachers from the central office.

When teachers can no longer rely on their professional expertise, then there is a great risk that their professional pride will be eroded. The dilemma of professional pride easily becomes an issue when non-professionals are involved in deciding what good teaching involves. Under such conditions, there remains no room for professional pride when non-professionals evaluate teachers. This is a matter of considerable concern Behzad when he complains:

> Officials rather than professionals define merit. Even in selecting teachers for beacon schools and merit schools, head teachers are consulted. My evaluation score depends on the head teachers' subjective idea. To keep my position in the high school, I must do as he wishes.

Reza's comments complement Behzad's concerns. While Behzad worries about being evaluated by non-professionals, Reza expresses deep sorrow about being evaluated with non-professional criteria when he says:

> We don't have any subject-specific evaluation scheme for language teachers. Teachers of all school subjects are evaluated with the same scheme. The scheme does not differentiate between workers working in factories and teachers. The evaluation scheme was not developed by the Ministry of Education. It was developed by Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Our officials seem to feel that the only way to ensure that good education is going on in individual schools and classrooms is to control teachers' practice through checking their pass rate in the final exams; that is, they stick to the efficiency agenda by measuring teachers' success by the yardstick of the pass rate. Since a high pass rate is positively reinforced, teachers are disciplined to reduce the universe of possible pedagogic acts to ones that guarantee high pass

rate. Evaluation is a disciplinary mechanism that has normalised high pass rate as the ideal. Omid's comments clearly indicate that the externally imposed yardstick of success is a major factor jeopardizing teachers' work. Explaining the criterion of success he says:

> I am judged by my students' pass rate in the final exams rather than by my teaching techniques and approach. If students fail, the teacher is reproached. This is not fair. Students may fail for a multitude of unknown reasons. The test does not test communicative competence. If all my students can communicate but they can't pass the final exam, I will face various punitive measures. Very early in my career I found that I am responsible for students' scores rather than their communicative capacity. This awareness helped me to gain the highest pass rate in the past three years.

Teacher Promotion Scheme

According to Dreeben (1970) teachers are salaried employees; they agree, through a written (or unwritten but formal) contract with a school board, on what tasks they shall perform in exchange for pay. That is, circulars and directives define a particular set of permissible acts. Promotion is a coherent system of rewarding compliance with the agreed tasks. Teachers are rewarded in one way or another when they are engaged in the defined acts. One of the subconsciously agreed upon tasks is efficiency in terms of pass rate and final scores. Promotion is a mechanism of rewarding efficiency. Reza's comments demonstrate how teacher evaluation is contingent upon pass rate:

> The director general gave me the award of advanced skills not for my knowledge but for my pass rate in the final exam. He wrote, "We hereby thank you for your ceaseless effort which led to 100% pass rate in the finals of 2009. 100% pass rate is evidence enough to grant you the award of advanced skills. Since I had the highest pass rate in the past few years, they assigned me to the managerial post. Now I am the principal.

Omid corroborates the foregoing comments when he complains that his knowledge and skills in language teaching are not recognized. He puts his concerns this way:

Promotion depends on years of experience and pass rate. I am not promoted for my teaching skills and knowledge. I am promoted if I have an acceptable pass rate.

Promotion criteria normalise and reinforce a set of non-professional activities. It plays an important part in the creation of disciplined teachers, that is, individuals who conformed to defined activities. Thus, promotion criteria have been designed to normalise a certain mode of thought and action as the culturally valued mode. Promotion is the disciplinary technology that allows for a clear and precise measurement of those attributes which people in power deem important enough to order and manage. In this sense, we can see promotion as an important disciplinary mechanism that creates conformity. Conformity is not the result of overt force that visibly bends the will of those subject to its operation; conformity results from the constant working of invisible constraints that bring us all toward the same normal range of practices and beliefs. To see how promotion criteria normalise a specific set of acts, take Ahmad's comments:

I have to withdraw from my own initiatives and follow the prescriptions of others. It is only by following the system that I am rewarded. Every bonus is for those who follow the system .For instance, teachers of beacon schools are not selected based on their performance in a test or observation of their teaching skills; they are selected because their approach is in tune with top-down rules and regulations.

Reza also believes that teachers are promoted if they are disciplined, in other words, do as they are told. He explains that convergence entails promotion and divergence entails marginalisation and loss of voice. His own comments better illustrate this conformist scenario:

Those who have forgotten all the principles of language teaching are promoted just because they do what they are told. If you follow your own initiative or if you respond to students' communicative needs, you are marginalized. The reason is that students' communicative ability is not measured in the final exams.

Teachers are aware of the fact that what they do in the classroom is not professionally justified. However, they forsake their professional knowledge and

conscience because they are sure that they are promoted only if they do as they are told. Ahmad's points better explain this issue:

> I will be promoted if I participate in a set of non-professional activities favoured and specified by the education system. If you participate in cultural activities specified by the directives for four years, you receive one grade. The credit is equivalent to the credit you receive by promoting yourself from BA to MA.

Consequences

Deskilling

Binding circulars together with directed promotion and evaluation delimit practice by impeding the prosecution of strategies and techniques supported by the principles of language learning and teaching and reinforcing conformity with rules and regulation. In other words, the circulars and promotion and evaluation schemes discipline teachers to do as they are told. Thus, instead of following a reflective approach and developing their practice, teachers follow a disciplined approach and wait for externally produced plans. Since all planning is done by officials, not teachers, the consequences of this are profound for teachers' professional life. Teachers' complaints are indicative of two destructive consequences.

The first is what we shall call the separation of competence from performance in teaching. Being externally controlled, teachers' performance is no longer directed by their competence. When central agencies have a strong and heavily loaded sense of what teachers' should be doing, then there will be little time to consider what teachers themselves think about teaching. In the long run teachers lose sight of the whole process and lose control over their own practice, since someone outside the immediate situation now has greater control over both the planning and what is actually happening. Reza vividly explains how his performance in testing and teaching is detached from his competence in these areas:

> Instead of following fundamental concepts of testing English, I develop tests by following the instructions given in the testing scheme. Instead of being directed by principles of language teaching, my teaching approach is shaped by the fixed testing scheme imposed by central agencies. Thus, instead of

using my knowledge of methodology to respond to learners' needs, I teach to the test by responding to the demands of the scheme.

The second consequence is related, but adds a further debilitating characteristic. This is known as deskilling. As teachers lose control over their own labour, the skills that they have developed over the years atrophy. They are slowly lost, thereby making it even easier for officials to increase control of one's job because the skills of planning and controlling oneself are no longer available. A general principle emerges here: in one's labour; lack of use leads to loss. To better understand how language teachers in public high schools in Iran lose their knowledge and skills over time, take Omid's points.

> When I entered the profession, I was fluent. I have a disempowering exit. I have lost my proficiency because all the way I followed a monolingual approach, i.e., I taught English through Persian. I have become an expert in preparing students for centrally planned tests. I have forgotten the techniques of language teaching because I could never use them. My teaching experience in public high schools deprived me of two precious things: my knowledge of language teaching and my fluency in using the English language.

Marginalization

While convergent practitioners are promoted at the cost of their professional knowledge, there are some that are marginalized because of their divergent approach. Their complaints are indicative of a sense of lost opportunity, lost voice, and lost position. Divergent teachers lack credibility and are not able to negotiate the right to speak on educational matters. These teachers complain that they have lost many chances of promotion because they resisted limiting conditions. To improve students' learning, these teachers tried to challenge disempowering conditions. Instead of being rewarded for their endeavors, they are deprived of many opportunities because the principal evaluates their work negatively. Negative evaluation entails being sent to schools that have been designated as failing. Reza, a divergent practitioner, complains:

> Since the principal does not favor my approach, he deprived me of the summer courses in which teachers are paid well. Two years ago, I was assigned to develop the final exam. My questions were not in line with

their expectations. My colleagues and the principal reproached me. I lost the chance of constructing final examinations forever. I teach in this remote area, I have lost many credits, merely because I don't allow non-professional intervention.

Language teacher promotion depends on the subjective judgment of the principal and the subjective judgment of the principal depends on students' pass rate on the final exams rather than teachers' effective use of principles, techniques, and strategies in language teaching. Officials take pass rates as the only yardstick of success and some teachers inflate students' pass rate to guarantee their promotion and popularity. Omid who is a divergent practitioner complains:

> I teach in this remote high school because my students' scores reflect their performance on the final exam. They want me to inflate students' scores like other teachers. I don't, and I will never do such a thing. Neither the students nor the principal likes this. I am taken as a bad teacher because my students' scores are lower than that of my other colleague. Pass rate is not indicative of learning. To ensure a high pass rate, some teachers teach selectively only the parts that are covered in the test and leave out the other parts covering oral activities. In the last thirteen years, I have never been rewarded merely because I do not teach to the test to inflate students' scores. If you try to improve your teaching performance through reflective practice, you are never promoted.

Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

To take structural parameters of practice into account, research approaches moved from the quantitative, positivistic to more narrative-based research that relied on teacher stories as a base of information about teacher knowledge (Carter, 1993). The results of this research does not lead to the development of generalisations of sample-based findings to population descriptions and explanations that are fundamental to positivistic research, but rather to the framing of patterns with respect to certain themes. Generalisations from this latter form are not laws to which we have to conform in order to be effective, but explanatory propositions with which we can make sense of the dilemmas and problems of teaching (Carter, 1993).

Teaching occurs within a structural context which Cornbleth (1990) argues is the "education system's established roles and relationships, including operating procedures, shared beliefs and norms...often distinguished as organisation and culture" (p. 35). Decisions made at all levels throughout the education system, from the central government authority to the school committee, will impact on classroom practice. These decisions may impede or improve teacher autonomy.

To ensure that decisions made at the top of the hierarchy are implemented by those at the bottom of the hierarchy, teachers are exposed to disciplining. According to Foucault (1977), discipline is an effective means of controlling and being able to predict such matters as employee behaviour. The role of discipline is to ensure that many people do their job in a uniform manner and with identical results. To control teachers' behaviour and make it predictable, first permissible acts are issued periodically through circulars and directives. They are then reinforced through teaching teams, evaluation, and promotion. That is, they act synergistically to condition teachers to teach in a predictable manner since some form of uniformity and structure is required for an organisation to function and individuals are thus assumed to be able to renounce certain of their own desires for the good of the collective. Since teachers' actions are directed by forces external to themselves, teaching can be described as a determined act.

However, it is characteristic of professional operations that the professionals themselves hold a mandate to decide what the job should consist of, how it is to be done, and determine when it has been done well. If teaching is to be professionalised in our high schools, disciplinary power must subordinate teacher power. Only then can teachers challenge forces that systematically de-skill them. They should be trusted to criticise evaluation and promotion criteria from the perspective of their own classroom practices. Professionals must have the autonomy to make decisions that marry skills with knowledge (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990). As Maxcy (1991) argued:

> Professionalism implies a kind of normative power. Educational professionals ought to have the power to form directives for action with regard to problems arising out of the exercise of their skills and expertise. Teaching professionals ought to have the power to make policy and policy decisions. By professionalism, I have in mind power being placed in the hands of educators such that they may possess leadership in policy and decision making affecting learning in schools (p. 160).

To improve the working conditions of language teachers in the context of this study and other similar contexts, the field is in an urgent need of a shift in attitude and action towards language teachers' work at the level of information, policy, and action. More specifically, teacher autonomy remains at the level of rhetoric unless researchers, policy makers, and teachers show a wholehearted willingness to change their mode of thought and action.

To this end, three changes are essential. First, researchers must shift away from theory-first studies that aim at improving language teaching practice towards data-first studies that aim at theorizing language teachers' concerns about teacher autonomy so as to enlighten the rhetoric of teacher autonomy and come up with propositions and hypotheses that are deeply grounded in practice rather than taken from fashionable theories of the day. Second, policy makers at different levels of education hierarchy must heed the research findings and make informed, data-based reform decisions rather than impressionistic and subjective decisions. More specifically, it is essential that policy makers trust research findings and let teachers experiment with their educational initiatives and innovation rather than comply with top-down policies. Third, teachers must initiate reform from the bottom-up by critically reflecting on their action, systematically theorizing their views, informing and persuading school principals, local authorities, and the central agency of education as well as educators and researchers through action research and pilot studies. That is, to move away from the consumer end of educational reform, it is important that each and every language teacher define his or her identity as a teacher-researcher rather than a teacher.

Earlier in the article, the researcher proposed that both internal and external constraints jeopardize language teacher autonomy. This study tried to uncover and conceptualize external factors that constrain language teacher autonomy. Since the constraints on teacher autonomy conceptualized in this study are not inclusive, more studies in similar contexts would uncover more external constraints on teacher autonomy. Moreover, further data-first studies need to be undertaken by interested researchers to uncover constraints internal to the language teachers including their untested hypotheses, limiting beliefs and views, and habituated, taken-for-granted teaching strategies. It is through the uncovering, conceptualizing, theorizing, and hypothesizing teachers' concerns about autonomous teaching that we can move away from the rhetoric of language teacher autonomy to teacher autonomy in practice.

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