Being critical and writer voice

These activities are based on one section (2.2) of the literature review from the previously cited MA dissertation on 'Autonomy'. The focus in these activities is on more detailed aspects of the writing. The section has been divided into three extracts. (Also see the discussion on this section in the activities for Chapter two and six)

In the extracts, identify instances where the writer is being critical and/or foregrounding their own voice; identify the writing strategies that have been used to do this (See Chapters 8 and 9). Use Table 9.1 in the book to identify where the 'propositional responsibility' (Groom 2000:22) lies for the information being presented.

After each of the extracts, there is a brief explanation of how writing techniques have been used to good effect to foreground writer voice and show a critical approach to the literature review.

Groom, N. (2000) 'Attribution and averral revisited: three perspectives on manifest intertextuality in academic writing', in P. Thompson (ed.), *Patterns and Perspectives: Insights into EAP Writing Practice*. Centre for Applied Language Studies: The University of Reading.

Extracts are adapted from: Barillaro, F. (2011) 'Teacher perspectives of learner autonomy in language learning'. MA dissertation,Sheffield Hallam University

Extract one

2.2   Defining learner autonomy

There has been a growing interest in learner autonomy in language teaching and learning over the past 30 years (Benson 2006) and much has been written in this area with the aim of coming to a better understanding of both the theory and practice of learner autonomy. However, reading through the literature one begins to see that learner autonomy is difficult to define precisely (Little 2002; Finch 2002) and that there are a number of different interpretations of the term. This lack of a coherent theory (Oxford 2003) may diminish the importance of learner autonomy, especially from the perspective of the teacher, thus making it difficult to implement and operationalise in the classroom (Reinders 2010). Our common goal as teachers, practitioners and researchers is to think critically about each of these views of learner autonomy, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses based on our current teaching and learning environments.

Explanation

In extract one, the writer foregrounds his own voice in three main ways:

- he uses non-integral references strategically to lead the reader through the argument, for example when he refers to (Benson 2006) and (Little 2002; Finch 2002). As he attributes different aspects of his argument to different authors he is integrating the sources effectively to support the points he wishes to make. The flow of the argument is not interrupted by the references.
- with the use of 'However' the writer signals that a qualifying statement will follow and is therefore being explicit about the relationship between source texts.
- in the final sentence of the paragraph which begins 'Our common goal as teachers …' the writer draws his own conclusion from all the sources cited in the paragraph and makes a recommendation of future action for teachers. By using the plural personal pronoun 'our' the writer is establishing a common identity with his intended readers and encouraging them to feel some joint ownership for his conclusion.

Extract two

The term learner autonomy was originally defined in the early 1980s by Henri Holec as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Little 2004; Benson 2006; Field 2007). Since then learner autonomy has been defined in many ways using such words as *capacity*, *willingness*, and *attitude.* The following are definitions of learner autonomy commonly found in much of the literature:

- *'… a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action' (Little 1991:4, cited in Finch 2002: 21)*

- *'…a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person' (Dam et al. 1990: 102)*

- *'… an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning' (Dickinson 1995:167)*

Benson and Voller (1997:2, cited in Dofs 2007: 1-2) provide five definitions for learner autonomy:

1. ... situations in which learners study entirely on their own
2. ... a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning
3. ... an inborn capacity [to learn] which is suppressed by institutional education
4. ... the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning
5. ... the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

Defining learner autonomy is no simple task as there is little consensus on its meaning. However, there is general agreement in all the literature that autonomous learners are those who understand the purposes of their learning programme, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of their learning objectives, plan practice opportunities, implement appropriate learning strategies, and regularly review and evaluate their progress (Cotterall 1995, 2000; Dickinson 1993, 1995; Little 2002, 2006; Field 2007).

What these definitions do well is give us a more holistic view of the learner (Little 2002) where the learner is perceived as a decision maker and one who is connected to the process of learning. They address the political aspect of learner autonomy where learners have the individual freedom to take control and make choices about their learning (Reinders 2010) as well as the philosophical view of learner autonomy

where choice and independence in learning are seen as essential in preparing learners for full citizenship in a rapidly changing society (Cotterall 1995; Mezirow 1997). However, these definitions may fall short in their appeal to the teacher as they fail to consider the practical, classroom element of learner autonomy and the role of the teacher.

Explanation

In the second extract there are examples of combined attribution which show the writer has synthesised information from different sources. In the first instance, the reference, (Little 2004; Benson 2006; Field 2007), demonstrates how three known authors in the field have all cited the same original definition of autonomy in the language learning field which was put forward by Holec in 1981. This shows a critical analysis of the literature resulting in a synthesis of sources; the non-integral reference is a way of bringing his own voice to the fore when highlighting this united viewpoint.

The following two sentences are unattributed (another writing technique to foreground writer voice) and highlight the key words in the definitions which follow. The writer is directing the reader's attention to the quotes that appear next.

Definitions from cited authors then take over for a short time in the form of short quotes and a paraphrase. The voices of the cited authors are prominent.

However, in the sentence that begins 'Defining learner autonomy is no easy task …', the writer introduces his own evaluative comment. First, there is another combined attribution, (Cotterall 1995, 2000; Dickinson 1993, 1995; Little 2002, 2006; Field 2007), which synthesises the common characteristics of autonomy mentioned by various researchers.

In the final paragraph of the extract, the writer uses evaluative language to critique the definitions of autonomy, for example, when saying 'What these definitions do well …' and 'However, these definitions may fall short in their appeal to the teacher …'. He includes both positive comments incorporating further non-integral references, (Reinders 2010) and (Cotterall 1995; Mezirow 1997) and more negative evaluation when noting the limitations of the definitions in relation to the role of the teacher. This final sentence is unattributed therefore representing the writer's own view. But he is careful to show cautious commitment to his position with the use of 'may'.

The paragraphs which follow in Extract three integrate citations to support the writer's argument about the importance of the teacher role given at the end of this extract.

Extract three

Benson (2008: 15) argues that learner autonomy from the teachers' perspective is primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning arrangements within established curricula'. A theory of learner autonomy must be informed by the perspective of the teacher in the classroom (ibid: 30). La Ganza (2008) offers a more appealing definition of learner autonomy for the teacher. He states:

> *'Learner autonomy is an achievement, attained interrelationally between the learner and the teacher' (p.65)*

Thus, it can be argued that the degree to which learners can become autonomous and take responsibility for their learning depends on their relationship with the teacher. Learner autonomy is an *interdependent* relationship where the subject of learning, in our case a foreign or second language, is placed between teacher and learner. It is in this space that the teacher helps the learner develop his or her ability to make choices in their learning. This for me is the true essence and meaning of autonomy. Just as learning is social, so is learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is an awareness of self as a learner which is developed through dialogue (e.g. with the teacher), social interaction and cooperation with others.

The concept of choice is fundamental to learner autonomy (Cotterall 2000). Autonomous learners can make choices in all aspects of their learning, and this includes when to be dependent on the teacher or when to be free from teacher direction. Chanock (2004) calls this *'responsible dependence on teachers'* (p.4). When learners are unable to take control of their learning, they are being responsible by asking someone who can help them and, as a result, they are better able to function in the new context (ibid). Learner autonomy is about knowing one's options and knowing how to interact with all the resources available for one's learning. The teacher is one resource, but more importantly, they help the learner become better aware of other learning options and opportunities which surround them.

It is not enough to define learner autonomy as the *ability*, *capacity* or *willingness* to take charge of one's learning, although one cannot deny that this is a goal to be achieved by the autonomous learner. Learner autonomy can differ in value and meaning from culture to culture due to differences in cultural beliefs (Oxford 2003). A definition of learner autonomy must respect the view of the teacher in a particular

teaching and learning context. The teachers' perspective is the starting point which initiates the dialogue needed for finding a definition and pedagogy of learner autonomy appropriate to the teaching and learning context. Just as the teacher is involved in developing learner autonomy, and supporting a learner's existing autonomy, it is vital that they are also involved in examining its definition and exploring classroom approaches and practices suitable and relevant to their educational setting. As Palfreyman (2003: 185) points out:

> *'…an educational organization which attempts to promote learner autonomy without facilitating discussion about what this means to different participants may well run into practical difficulties, which are all the more baffling if those concerned appear to share a common goal.'*

Explanation

The writer is arguing a position here with regard to the role of the teacher in a definition of autonomy.

Propositional responsibility changes quite a lot in this extract as the writer uses a mix of integral references with a reporting verb, non-integral references and unattributed statements. This adds variety to the writing whilst writer voice is clearly directing the flow of the text.

He shows connections between sources and uses an evaluative comparative adjective when writing 'La Ganza (2008) offers a more appealing definition …'

The writer follows La Ganza's quote with his own unattributed summary and viewpoint based on the previous citations. By using a personal pronoun, 'This for me is the true essence …', he is positioning himself very assertively within the viewpoints expressed in the literature. Note: it could be argued that in this paragraph, a reference should have been included after '… learning is social'.

In the following paragraph on 'choice' the learner cites sources (Cotterall 2000 and Chanock 2004) to support the key points in the argument and then summarises the ideas in his own words to pull the argument together. The mixture of a non-integral reference, an integral reference and a short direct quotation adds interest to the writing.

In the final paragraph the writer makes an evaluative comment on the conventional definition of autonomy by beginning 'It is not enough …' although the inclusion of 'one cannot deny… ' softens the negativity.

A non-integral reference to (Oxford 2003) and a direct quote from Palfreyman are integrated to support the mainly unattributed assertions made by the writer. The introduction to the quote, 'As Palfreyman (2003: 185) points out …' shows shared propositional responsibility between the writer and the cited author for the content of the quote. The words belong to Palfreyman but the writer endorses them by the wording of his introduction. This is an effective way of drawing in support for the writer's strong position in this section of the literature review.