
Autonomy in English Language Teaching: A Case Study of Novice Secondary School Teachers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Following years of pre-service teacher education, novice teachers are often enthusiastic about embarking on the journey in the teaching profession. However, they may not always possess the internal capacity and institutional support to take effective control of their teaching. This paper reports on a case study of the teaching lives of two novice secondary school ESL (English as a second language) teachers in Hong Kong, drawing on qualitative data gathered through individual face-to-face interviews, and supplemented by email exchanges and telephone conversations, over a one-year period. The study investigates how novice English teachers develop their teacher autonomy, and what factors contribute to their development as autonomous English teachers. The paper concludes that novice English teachers in Hong Kong possess the capacity and are also ready for autonomy, and that an invitational, supportive and collaborative school environment plays a decisive role in affording ample opportunities for novices to develop their autonomy in language teaching. The study suggests that novice teachers should become critically aware of the affordances (opportunities, possibilities, invitations, enablements) in their working conditions, and should meanwhile exercise their teacher agency to act on these affordances to pursue their personal-professional development.

Keywords: *teacher autonomy, professional development, teacher agency, affordances, novice teachers*

1. Introduction

The notion of autonomy has received increasing attention in educational research, especially in

foreign language education (Benson, 2007; Huang & Benson, 2013). Over the past two decades, the idea of autonomy has evolved to be not only a goal of education but also an important element in quality teaching and learning. While learner autonomy has been extensively investigated, teacher autonomy has not gained as much attention until relatively recently (Huang, 2007, 2010, 2013; Long, 2014; Sinclair, 2008; Teng, 2018; Xu, 2015).

McGrath (2000) highlights the importance of teacher autonomy in teacher professionalism. Inquiry into teacher autonomy allows us to move toward education as transformation from education as reproduction (Vieira, Barbosa, Paiva, & Fernandes, 2008). Teacher autonomy may create tension for novice teachers. For example, novice teachers need to handle the tension between their work as professional practitioners in the classroom while being dependent on the organizational structure, including the embedded rules, curriculum, and “Schemes of Work” (Teng, 2018). This kind of tension may result in dilemmas and strong perceptions of risk for novice teachers as they exercise autonomy in teaching. In addition, it is problematic for policy-makers to demand that novice teachers execute agentic behaviors in their classroom practices, and then simultaneously deny them the means to do so or effectively disable them. Therefore, there is a need to revisit the individual dimensions of what it means to be an autonomous teacher, as well as the cultural and structural conditions that play an important role in enabling novice teachers to take control of their teaching.

Teacher autonomy has not received the attention it deserves in the field of ESL (English as a second language) teaching. Few initiatives have been made to investigate the development of teacher autonomy among novice ESL teachers (Teng, 2018). In addition, the image of teachers as reflective, self-determining, life-long learning practitioners with high professional autonomy has become a hegemonic international discourse. This study sets out to look into how novice ESL teachers, referred to in this study as those with less than three years of full-time teaching experience, develop their autonomy in teaching and what factors influence their development as autonomous teachers, through an in-depth inquiry of two novice secondary school ESL teachers in Hong Kong.

2. Autonomy in language teaching

Autonomy is concerned with defining and exploring personal meanings and purposes (Huang, 2006). This interpretation of autonomy relates the concept to the idea of individual agency. Interestingly, Toohey (2007) suggests that autonomy is “socially situated agency” (p. 232). Agency can be briefly defined as “the capacity to act otherwise” (Giddens, 1976, p. 75) or interpreted as “the self-conscious reflexive actions of human beings” (Sealey & Carter, 2004, p. xiii). It is related to how individuals “assign relevance and significance to things and events” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 143). Based on these interpretations, Huang (2011, 2013) proposes that agency entails actions, in particular, actions arising from deliberation and choice. This echoes elements of self-directedness and personal relevance that are often highlighted in understanding the multifaceted concept of autonomy (see Huang & Benson, 2013).

Following Benson’s (2001) concise definition of learner autonomy as “the capacity to

take control of one's own learning" (p. 47), Huang (2007) succinctly conceptualizes teacher autonomy as "teachers' willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning" (p. 33). In a similar vein, Benson (2010) and Benson and Huang (2008) view teacher autonomy as teachers' professional freedom and their capacity to create such freedom within prevailing constraints. As far as day-to-day teaching is concerned, Benson (2012) suggests that the opening-up of spaces for autonomy is challenging, and support from colleagues, friends and professionals is clearly of help. In order to develop teacher autonomy, there is an emerging tendency to construct teachers explicitly as agents of change (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Thus, teacher agency is interpreted as an alternative means of understanding how teachers might enact practice and engage with policy. This interpretation of teacher agency allows questions to be asked about the conditions under which teachers may achieve agency in developing teacher autonomy.

In terms of developing teacher autonomy, a teacher needs to be an agent unceasingly moving between the need to resort to other teachers for help or support and the need to maintain a sense of agentic behavior. A teacher may possess various identities in the process of achieving autonomy. The development of teacher autonomy serves as the repository of particular experiences in classrooms and schools, the site of emotions, behaviors, thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes (Zembylas, 2005). Teacher identity, which originates from teachers' participation and practice in their situated professional and socio-cultural contexts (Teng, 2017), delineates how teachers construct ideas or build practical knowledge on ways to be and act like a teacher (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). This knowledge is also expected to deepen novice teachers' understanding of the qualities required of an autonomous teacher and determining ways of achieving these qualities. In line with teacher identity as a fluid, unstable, dynamic, and multi-faceted notion (Yuan & Lee, 2016), the development of teacher autonomy for novice teachers may also be an unstable, fluctuating process.

There may be no perfect route for developing novice teachers' autonomy as novice teachers may have different roles, rights, and responsibilities assigned by the school or society. However, the development of teacher autonomy emphasizes the importance of self-direction, collaboration, critical reflective inquiry, empowerment, and dialogue (Pineda & Frodden, 2008). If an autonomous teacher should be defined as "fully competent, motivated by having a calling and a positive attitude to his or her students, which allows him or her to facilitate the learning process by creating a favorable classroom atmosphere" (Gabryś-Barker, 2017, p.175), teacher autonomy will come with experience with students and the teaching conditions under which novice teachers become experienced teachers. Hence, the development of teacher autonomy may be a fluid process and, while encountering various internal and external factors, novice teachers may perceive different constraints or affordances in taking control over their teaching.

3. Constraints on and affordances for teacher autonomy

Teaching is stressful and demanding to novices. The first year is usually the most challenging in a teacher's career. Constraints on teacher autonomy are manifold and from different levels, as

illustrated by Benson's (2012) model in Hong Kong school contexts.

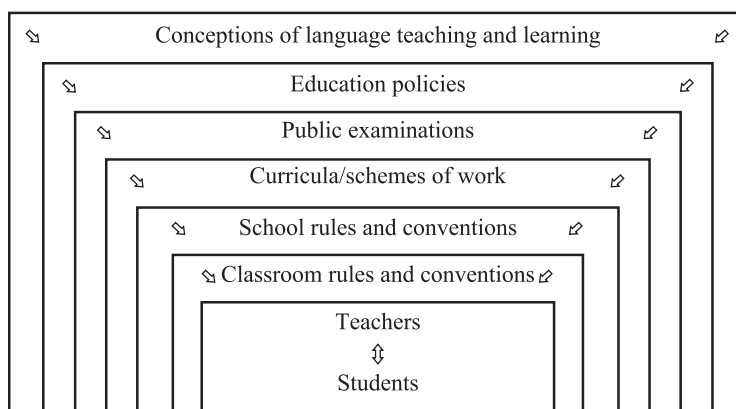


Figure 1. Constraints on teacher autonomy

According to Benson (2012), the layers in the figure show the relative distance of each constraint from the classroom. The arrows indicate that all the constraints exert an influence on the classroom (teachers and students). Therefore, the classroom, being the innermost layer, bears the greatest weight of constraint. Benson (2010) particularly noted Schemes of Work as a constraint on teacher autonomy because they mandate what teachers should do instead of what students should achieve.

Benson (2000) suggests earlier two extra ideological constraints on teacher autonomy: Teachers' conceptions of language and their language teaching methodologies. As language teachers, conceptions and beliefs about teaching methodologies have a dominant effect on teaching practices. This may affect their autonomy as they may not be willing to try out new possibilities which contradict their conceptions and beliefs. Other researchers add more constraints to the list. An obvious one relates to time (Pinter, 2007). This is especially true for Hong Kong teachers, who are often burdened with heavy teaching loads and administrative work. This leaves them with little time for continuous professional development (CPD). Aoki (2002) states that teachers' working conditions and their spaces for participation in institutional decision making may exert great pressure on teachers to conform rather than to transform.

Given the "social and personal constraints on the development of teacher and learner autonomy" (Vieira et al., 2008, p. 219), we must emphasize the importance of teacher autonomy in teacher education and school pedagogy. A sense of powerlessness among teachers leads to anxiety and frustration. If constraints might imply possibilities (opportunities, invitations, enablements), it is up to teachers to create possibilities out of existing constraints. In this sense, autonomy is about how teachers take advantage of the opportunities their institutional structures afford them (affordances). Based on Gibson (1979), affordances can be broadly conceptualized as perceived possibilities for action (Allison & Huang, 2005). Remarking upon the power of individual agency in shaping what constitutes an affordance, Billett (2001) found that the readiness of the workplace in affording individuals opportunities for professional development determines the quality of teaching and learning in the workplace.

4. Method

4.1 Research questions

This study aims to explore how two novice teachers develop their autonomy in ESL teaching and what factors may influence their autonomous development in the Hong Kong school contexts. The study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do novice secondary school teachers in Hong Kong take control of their ESL teaching?
- 2) What influences their development as autonomous ESL teachers?

4.2 Research design

This is a qualitative case study. A qualitative design helps the researchers “develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). In this study, the central phenomenon is the quest for autonomy among novice secondary school English teachers in Hong Kong.

A case study approach, referred to as “interpretation in context” (Merriam, 2009, p. 42), captures the complex action, perception and interpretation of the participants (Merriam, 2009). Through interviewing our participants at different time points over a one-year period, the researchers were able to track their development of autonomy during their initial year of teaching.

Two participants, Anthony and Simon, took part in this study. The second author (Lock) knew both of them prior to this study. He worked with Anthony for one year in a tutorial center and enrolled in the same teacher education program one year later than Simon. Both participants had completed a local teacher education program and were first-year teachers in local secondary schools when this study was carried out. They were also willing to share their teaching lives with the researchers.

Sampling decisions are often associated with the struggle and balance between the width and depth of data and analyses. Given that “the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site” (Creswell, 2012, p. 209), the sampling size of this study was kept small to facilitate the uncovering of the complexity of our participants’ teaching lives.

4.3 Data collection and data analysis

Two semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews, conducted in English and each lasting around one hour, were conducted with each participant. Prior to the interviews, they signed a consent form acknowledging that (1) they took part in the study voluntarily; (2) they were

free to withdraw from the study anytime; and (3) all interviews were audio-taped for research purpose.

The first round of interviews was carried out about two months after they started their first-year teaching. The interviews focused on their teaching lives, such as their adaptation to the school environment, lesson planning and classroom teaching, working relationship with colleagues, challenges encountered and the strategies they adopted or planned to adopt to overcome those challenges. The second round of interviews allowed the researchers to obtain the latest updates on their teaching lives and to clarify any unclear points made in the previous interview. During the interviews, open-ended questions were asked to allow our participants to “create the options for responding ... without being forced into research possibilities” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006, p. 218).

Data were also collected between the two interviews and following the second round of interviews through regular email exchanges and telephone conversations. Information obtained from these sources enriched the interview data by providing a fuller picture of their first-year teaching journey.

Qualitative data analysis involves an “inductive investigative strategy” (Merriam, 2009, p. 39). The interviews were first transcribed and coded thematically, and compared with the data obtained from other sources to ensure consistency. The resulting thematic structure of each case was then investigated for emerging themes, which were discussed with reference to the research questions.

5. Findings

In this section, the key findings of this study are presented in the form of a story of each participant. These stories provide rich descriptions of how they manage their day-to-day teaching and form the basis for further discussion of the findings in the section that follows.

5.1 Anthony's story

Anthony taught English at a local English medium of instruction (EMI) secondary school. He was in charge of three junior classes and some senior small-group classes. Noting that his teaching load was “perhaps lighter than most novice teachers”, he was “extremely busy with lesson preparation and marking” (1st and 2nd interviews). Anthony said that he was lucky as his non-teaching duties as the teacher-in-charge for the debate team and the secretary of the Career and Guidance Committee did not require lots of time. As a novice, he felt stressed at times. “It’s all about what you think is more worth the time”, Anthony remarked (2nd interview).

Collaboration was at the heart of his school culture. The coming up of the Scheme of Work was a joint effort among English teachers. It contained a list of textbook chapters and

language points to be covered. Changes to those documents were made during the academic year based on the consensus of colleagues. Anthony valued the Scheme of Work as a means to “standardize” what students learn (2nd interview) rather than constraints on teacher autonomy (cf. Benson, 2010).

Lesson planning was also a collective endeavor. As Anthony noted, “every cycle we have a lesson planning period and we’ll discuss together what to put in the curriculum and what to put in the notes” (1st interview). Chaired by a form (grade) coordinator, these meetings typically covered their pace of teaching, preparation of handouts and notes and adjustments to the teaching content. Anthony commended the decentralized power structure within the panel in which coordinators made decisions for their respective levels, and the panel head was there to foster consensus. Collaboration in lesson planning was also manifested in the active and generous sharing of teaching resources:

Sometimes, even if you are not the one responsible for preparing that part of a chapter, you may still prepare something related, and the teachers would actually appreciate your effort. I mean we inspire each other. That’s how we grow and learn in the teaching profession. (2nd interview)

Immersed in this sharing culture, Anthony felt comfortable sharing the materials he prepared with his colleagues. The exchange of ideas among English teachers was also facilitated by their proximity in the school. Since they were all situated in the same staff room, much of the communication was made conveniently through informal discussion in the staff room rather than formal meetings.

Every new teacher in Anthony’s school would be assigned a mentor. Anthony found his mentor supportive in offering him practical advice on issues ranging from subject knowledge to assignment marking strategies to student misbehavior in class. He particularly recalled discussing with his mentor how to implement the readers’ theater, a strategy Anthony was not familiar with. There was also a peer observation scheme in which the panel head observed panel members’ lessons once every term. To Anthony, these were opportunities for him to receive “constructive feedback” (a term Anthony often used in interviews and informal contacts) on his strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Considered a learning experience for teachers, post-observation discussions were made encouraging by, for example, replacing criticisms with constructive suggestions for improvement.

Anthony strived to create spaces for autonomous teaching, asserting himself as “the boss in the classroom” making decisions about his teaching (2nd interview). Considering the Schemes of Work a guide rather than rigid rules, he took the initiatives in modifying pre-prepared teaching resources and producing his own materials in response to learner needs. As he remarked, “as a teacher we always would like to do more” (1st interview). Anthony was also concerned about building an “authoritative image” in the classroom:

... Students would tend to misbehave more because they know that you are a new teacher and you don't know the system well and you can't even call their names. And you don't have any image there; you haven't set up as a person that students would be afraid of. (1st interview)

Because of his inability in handling student discipline problems, he found the interactive learning approach, a pedagogy he used to value a lot, difficult to implement. Anthony was therefore keen on developing his competence in managing classroom discipline.

Anthony joined a number of school-based staff development programs to develop himself as a professional teacher. Most of them were seminars, with topics ranging from the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting collaborative learning to marking strategies to the management structure in his school. Anthony remarked that there were not many programs which addressed direct teaching-related issues such as teaching strategies and working with students. As a whole, he found them of limited usefulness in enhancing his professional development.

All in all, Anthony found his career in the teaching profession so far both challenging and satisfying. Though he said, from time to time, that as a novice teacher, he unavoidably encountered a lot of difficulties in teaching (often without going into the details of the difficulties and constraints), his enthusiasm and his colleagues' support motivated him to try his best to foster a competent teacher image in front of his students. He attributed his professional growth and autonomous development (e.g., effective control over his own teaching) to the following: Perceived manageable workload ("perhaps lighter than most novice teachers" as mentioned by Anthony), collegiality (particularly collegiality nurtured by the sharing culture of the school), the scaffolding role of Schemes of Work rather than the constraining effect reported by Benson (2010), the peer observation scheme and subsequent constructive feedback, collaboration between fellow teachers in lesson planning and other teaching activities, and the guidance and support from the mentor and the school. These were the major possibilities for actions, that is, affordances (Allison & Huang, 2005), which Anthony was able to act upon, so the usual types of difficulties novice teachers in other schools in Hong Kong and in other socio-educational contexts often encountered in their first year teaching, such as heavy workload and insufficient time for lesson preparation, adaption to a new environment and classroom management (see Huang & Lock, 2016), did not eventually become an insurmountable problem for Anthony. In addition to being "extremely busy with lesson preparation and marking", other challenges he also mentioned (but again did not really complain about) in the interviews, email exchanges and telephone conversations included managing student discipline problems, the implementation of the interactive learning pedagogy that he had acquired from the pre-service teacher education program and the lack of school-based teaching-related staff development programs.

5.2 Simon's story

Simon was a first-year teacher in a local EMI secondary school under the Direct Subsidy

Scheme (DSS).^{*} We found himself “acceptably busy”, with “a reasonable teaching and non-teaching workload” (1st interview). He was in charge of teaching two junior language classes and a senior literature class.

Simon found himself situated in a liberal school context in which professional autonomy and collaboration formed its core values. Such a school culture was reflected in multiple aspects. The first thing that Simon noted was how the Scheme of Work was formulated. Instead of mandating topics to be covered, English teachers in his school decide on teaching themes collectively based on their individual strengths and preferences. Through exercising their professional autonomy in choosing what to teach, they make sure that they are competent at and passionate about teaching those topics. This helped them build “a competent image” (2nd interview) in the classroom, which facilitated learning. English teachers also co-produced teaching materials and held weekly meetings to reflect on their teaching in order to make their teaching “more complementary” (2nd interview). In Simon’s view, collaboration among teachers was not only desirable but necessary and inevitable because it was “not possible for teachers to handle all the work alone” (2nd interview).

Following the Scheme of Work “closely but not rigidly” (2nd interview), he routinely and strategically completed the assigned topics early so he could engage his students in other learning activities. For example, Simon reserved English lessons on Fridays for fun learning and he called it “relaxing Friday”. “I made worksheets for them. The materials are chosen by me because I know their proficiency level the best” (1st interview). He once turned the classroom into a restaurant and taught his students how to order food by asking them to perform the roles of waiters and customers. His students enjoyed the lesson a lot, and they were highly engaged in the creative activities.

Learner needs were of prime concern to Simon in his instructional strategies. In his class, he made English lessons communicative and interactive because he found that his students lacked chances and motivation to speak in English. He once rewarded his class for speaking in English in his lesson by showing them one of his ugliest photos. While this strategy worked that time, he knew that in the long run, “their confidence, interest and motivation in speaking the language” and ultimately “their autonomy in ESL learning” must be developed (2nd interview). In his form/grade 2 remedial class, on the other hand, Simon included more hands-on experience to help them build a solid foundation in grammar.

Collaboration also took the form of a peer observation scheme. For example, his level coordinator observed that he easily went off-track during lessons, a problem that Simon had never noticed by himself. Simon found the peer observation experiences, in particular, the post-observation feedback, constructive: “... We do discuss but not the kind of discussion that will make you feel pressurized or make you feel bad. We are just talking like friends and colleagues and try to enhance each other’s teaching” (1st interview). Through such interactions, Simon

* The Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) was introduced by the Hong Kong SAR government in 1991. Sufficiently high-achieving primary and secondary schools could join the scheme and receive subsidies from the government and make their own decisions concerning the curriculum, school fees and entrance requirements. The aim of this scheme is to improve the quality of private school education in Hong Kong.

identified the “blind spots” in his teaching and made appropriate adjustments to “enhance students’ control over their learning as well as his control over teaching” (1st interview).

Simon noted a few factors that facilitated collaboration among English teachers in his school. First, he often mentioned that the English team was “young and vibrant”, and there was “little hierarchy” among them. Most of them were “open-minded” and receptive to new pedagogies. Second, all English teachers were stationed in the same staff room, and this made communication convenient. Most importantly, teachers in Simon’s school were keen to collaborate and were active in contributing ideas, treating one another as “learning partners” (1st interview). Simon highly commended the professionalism of his colleagues in this respect and felt that teacher collaboration is the key to professional development for novices: “... I guess every one of us is quite comfortable with our own way. But when we are struck by another force, then we will learn something from the other and try to use their methods in our class” (1st interview).

Simon was appreciative of his school in offering him great chances for professional development. He was sent to Singapore for a four-day International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum training program, which had prepared him for teaching that curriculum effectively through experience-sharing and discussion. On the other hand, Simon was doubtful of the usefulness of school-based staff development programs in improving his teaching, one of which was about the legal roles of teachers. While not downplaying its importance, Simon pointed out that “sitting there for three hours to learn about the legal roles of a teacher doesn’t really help me to teach” (2nd interview).

Overall, his first-year teaching experience was satisfying. “Everything is quite on-track now” (2nd interview). Like Anthony, Simon also felt that he was lucky to work in a liberal and humanistic environment. The kinds of “workplace affordances” (Billett, 2001) such as manageable workload (“acceptably busy” as mentioned by Simon), collegiality and sharing culture, flexible implementation of Schemes of Work, peer observation and constructive feedback, full collaboration among colleagues, and effective mentoring, which worked for Anthony, also nurtured Simon’s teacher agency to foster his sense of control over teaching (teacher autonomy). What was slightly different from Anthony’s case was that Simon was working in an even more liberal environment with a “young”, “vibrant” and “open-minded” English team and with “little hierarchy”, and thus was able to adopt a stronger version of learner-centered pedagogy and to create more spaces for experimenting with new ideas to enhance his own teaching and facilitate student learning. Also like Anthony, common constraints and difficulties in the first year teaching were considered as “under control” (a term Simon sometimes mentioned in our contacts) and were not emphasized in our face-to-face interviews, email exchanges or telephone conversations, although one year later Simon left the teaching profession to work in the government partly because he considered he still lacked full confidence in teaching English to secondary school students in Hong Kong in accordance with his own teaching philosophy and partly because he wanted to try something else when he was still young (see Huang & Lock, 2016).

6. Discussion

This section discusses the experiences of the two case study participants (Anthony and Simon) with regard to the two research questions. One point to note was that compared with teachers in other schools in Hong Kong (Huang & Lock, 2016), the particular liberal and humanistic elements of the two schools they were working in (manageable workload, collegiality, collaboration, flexible rather than rigid implementation of Schemes of Work, peer observation and constructive feedback) might afford more opportunities for their personal and professional development which, we have found, are often absent in many other contexts. In this respect, they were probably not common cases in Hong Kong, according to the authors' educational experiences and observations (the first author has been supervising teaching practice in around 100 primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong in the past years while the second author had taught for some time in a secondary school in Hong Kong at the time of writing this paper). Therefore, this study did not intend to generalize its findings to all novice teachers in Hong Kong and other socio-educational contexts but to provide a different perspective to understand how novice teachers might develop their teacher autonomy in their first-year day-to-day teaching, provided that they have the chance to work in a supportive and affordance-rich environment.

6.1 Novice teachers' autonomy development

Situated in friendly, invitational school contexts, our two participants were able to capitalize on the existing opportunities afforded by their respective institutional structures to facilitate student learning. This enabled them to create spaces, within common constraints that novice teachers often encounter in various school contexts, for their autonomous teaching in their own classrooms. For example, Anthony's Schemes of Work were largely textbook-based without specifying what learning tasks to be included. Such Schemes of Work did not seem to offer novice teachers like Anthony much concrete help in his day-to-day teaching but fortunately left "spaces and opportunities for maneuver" (Lamb, 2000, p. 128). Anthony was thus able to exercise his individual agency to modify teaching resources prepared by his colleagues and produce his own materials to suit the needs of his own students. Similarly, Simon was passionate about planning and implementing his own lessons outside the scope of his Schemes of Work. He made accurate observations on the characteristics and needs of his students and tailor-made meaningful and interesting class activities for them. He also adopted different instructional strategies in different classes even when that meant he had to step out of his comfort zone and experiment with ideas that he was not familiar with. In short, both Anthony and Simon considered the Schemes of Work a framework guiding their teaching (providing some form of standardization) and scaffolding their professional learning and did not find them constraining teacher autonomy as in other studies (e.g., Benson, 2010). They retained some degree of professional autonomy in planning and implementing their lessons while adhering to their Schemes of Work, which enhanced their sense of control over their teaching and professional learning.

Our participants were highly engaged in enhancing their capacity to take control of their teaching by learning from peers and more-experienced colleagues. In addition to making sense of and gaining insights from teaching materials developed by his colleagues, Anthony took the initiative to seek advice particularly from his mentors for a wide range of work-related issues. He also took his lesson observation sessions seriously and made use of these opportunities to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of his teaching. Simon also engaged in “workplace learning” (Billett, 2001). He actively exchanged ideas with his colleagues, his “learning partners”, who were “young, vibrant and open-minded” in his own terms. Through peer observation and constructive post-observation feedback, he was able to identify his strengths and “blind spots” — in a sense, the open/blind/hidden/unknown self as shown in the Johari window (cited in DeVito, 2003, p. 97) — so that he could take corresponding measures to improve his classroom practices. Being sensitive to student needs and paying great attention to student motivation, he employed a range of creative activities and strategies in his classroom, such as “relaxing Friday”, to make learning as enjoyable as possible.

Therefore, as far as Schemes of Work and their day-to-day teaching are concerned, the constraints noted by Benson (2000, 2010, 2012) and Pinter (2007) did not seem to be oppressive to our participants. Instead, our participants demonstrated the ability and eagerness to make good use of existing opportunities in their school contexts to create spaces for autonomous teaching. In Aoki’s (2002) words, the teachers were not merely conforming to the established institutional practices; instead, they were willing and able to transform such practices. This gained sense of control was attributed to individual teacher agency at work, which was grounded in a positive professional identity that novice teachers were eager to establish, for example, “a competent image” (Simon) and “the boss in the classroom” (Anthony).

Teaching is a cognitive process that involves teachers’ expectations, perceptions, awareness, judgment, prescription, and decision making (Wilson, 2004). In addition, teachers’ interaction with students, mentors, and other stakeholders may help them discern their students’ needs. This is related to a sense of taking control of teaching. In this connection, mentors’ support on experiencing the classroom dynamics is an effective way for novice teachers to take control of their teaching, as revealed by the two participants’ mentee experiences in the present study. For example, both Antony and Simon received support from mentors in helping them internalize their teaching beliefs and avert reality shock. However, one thing to bear in mind is that novice teachers are likely to encounter multiple conflicting expectations that are not in line with their own beliefs. For example, Anthony found the school-based development programs “of limited use” while Simon was “doubtful” of the effectiveness of school-based staff development programs in enhancing teaching. Therefore, teachers need better management of clinical information to enhance their sense in exercising professional autonomy in teaching.

6.2 Factors influencing novice teachers’ autonomy development

That our participants were able to enhance their capacity to take control over teaching during

their initial year was to a large extent attributable to their readiness for autonomy and the opportunities that the particular socio-institutional structures had afforded them. As far as personal factors are concerned, our participants were willing to engage themselves in workplace learning. For example, both of them thought quite positively about lesson observation. Rather than emphasizing the stressfulness that most novice teachers would associate lesson observation with, Anthony and Simon chose to treat it as an opportunity by accepting their observers' feedback as constructive input. Their determination to make teaching student-centered also motivated them to reflect on their teaching and modify their instructional strategies for promoting student and teacher autonomy. Our findings are in line with Pinter's (2007) assertion that willingness to change is essential for professional growth. It is this "changing teacher personality" (Thavenius, 1999, p. 159) that cultivates a sense of learner-centeredness in teaching, which involves a continuous cycle of reflection, experimentation, regulation, and negotiation (Vieira et al., 2008). However, this poses an issue of how teachers can sustain their initial willingness to change after one year of teaching. Although this is not the scope of the present study, it may be interesting to explore how teachers manage to maintain their growing recognition of the institutional role, and how they can overcome the tensions that may exist in the contemporary teaching profession. Teachers are often left to take personal and collective responsibility for improving their skills and subject knowledge (Teng, 2018). The school should guide new teachers so that they could develop a sense of belonging to the school and to create opportunities for them to make contributions to the school. This can be done through allocating mentors, tutors, providing supportive and informative settings, and opportunities for critical reflection on practice and meaningful engagement in professional debates (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006). The two teacher participants in the present study seemed to experience a school system that provides support to the development of a positive professional identity. However, other school systems may be rooted in a bureaucratic-managerial approach which may hinder novice teachers from being self-determined to develop their autonomy.

Our data therefore clearly revealed how institutional structures afforded opportunities for novice teachers' autonomy development. One such enablement concerned teacher collaboration, which could take many forms. The preparation and implementation of Schemes of Work were the result of collaborative discussion. In Simon's case, the Schemes of Work were even formulated with reference to teachers' strengths and preferences, and this was a combination of collaboration and professional discretion. Collaboration also took the form of materials sharing, with Anthony remarking on how he learned from the shared resources and how that inspired him to exercise his agency in modifying and producing his own materials. This kind of goal-oriented collaboration have alleviated their stress and anxiety level, and contrary to Xu's (2015) argument, did not seem to compromise their eagerness for autonomy. In contrast, such collaboration had inspired Anthony and Simon to create spaces for teacher autonomy based on the outcomes of collaboration.

Collaboration also took the form of mentoring, including lesson observation. This ongoing dialogic process of exchanging ideas enabled novice teachers to gradually transform the mechanical approach they acquired from pre-service teacher education programs to a set

of more internalized skills (Evertson & Smithey, 2000). As Schön (1990) succinctly points out, novice teachers' development of a personalized and integrated teaching approach, together with their growing critical reflectivity and receptiveness to new ideas, form the foundation for their continuous professional development. The first year is critical in determining whether a novice teacher is going to stay in the teaching profession and very often, those who are afforded plenty of psychological support are the ones who are more likely to successfully complete their first year of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Therefore, effective mentoring is indispensable in enabling novice teachers to develop their autonomy in teaching.

Overall, our findings suggest two types of factors for developing teacher autonomy: (1) Teachers' own passion and their sense of responsibility for their students and thus a positive professional teacher identity ("a competent image" and "the boss" in the novice teachers' own classrooms in this study); (2) whole "sets of affordances" (see Huang, Long, & Teng, 2018, p. 43, citing Aronin & Singleton, 2012) such as manageable workload to create possibilities for liberating teachers from simply conforming to tight schedules and rigid practices, teachers' professional discretion in defining standards of schooling and freedom of choice over the content of instruction and application of teaching resources, collegiality characterized by a sharing culture and open-minded colleagues, full-scope teacher collaboration, constructive peer feedback (e.g., in peer lesson observation in the study) and genuine and effective mentoring. It should also be noted that teacher passion and a positive professional identity might shape novice teachers' perceptions of affordances and affect how they act upon the perceived affordances. It is through continuously acting upon the workplace affordances (Billett, 2001) that novice teachers develop their autonomy in language teaching and professional learning.

7. Conclusion and implications

This qualitative inquiry into the teaching lives of two secondary school English teachers in Hong Kong demonstrates that novice teachers are able to exercise their teacher agency to take effective control of their teaching and professional learning, that is, to develop their teacher autonomy, in an invitational and supportive socio-institutional environment. Their school contexts have afforded them ample opportunities for professional development, and our participants succeeded in taking advantage of these opportunities to create spaces for their autonomous teaching. This is in stark contrast to the widely-held perception that novice teachers are inadequately supported in the workplace and were often left to sink or swim (see Huang & Lock, 2016, for a comparative study of novice teachers in Shenzhen and Hong Kong).

This study sheds light on how novice teachers can be better supported in terms of school-initiated CPD programs. First, in view of the discrepancy between what the school thinks novices need and what novices themselves think they need for professional development, there is a requirement for schools to better understand and cater for the professional learning needs of these teachers. Schools should, therefore, strive to provide an autonomy-supportive environment for teachers. Effective teacher education programs should be developed to afford

opportunities for novice teachers to utilize their professional expertise, and to develop their professional judgments. Teachers' voices should also be addressed. By making themselves heard, novice teachers develop their autonomy both as learners and teachers. It has been argued that the current teacher development programs are often based on a "one size fits all" approach, without considering the individual needs of in-service teachers (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998, p. 55). CPD programs should move from a lecturing mode toward a mode modeling the constructivist approach, engaging teachers intellectually in teaching-related knowledge (Corcoran, 2006).

Second, teacher education programs should contribute to raising teachers' awareness of wielding power responsibly, exercising autonomy aptly, and executing professional conduct effectively (Reed, 2000). The teachers in the present study are activists who smartly critique mandates that hinder development of autonomy on the basis of credible professional knowledge. However, other teachers may not be adequately prepared for doing so due to the fragmentation and discontinuities of teacher education. Hence, teacher education and induction programs for novice teachers should take teachers' needs and concerns into consideration, with a final goal towards the appropriate and responsible exercise of autonomy.

Finally, teacher power is the prerequisite for teacher autonomy (Webb, 2002). There is a need to support teachers with power in terms of exercising autonomy in teaching and learning rather than devising ways to eliminate teachers' power base. The situation of teacher compliance will become exacerbated when teachers are excluded from developing initiatives for exercising autonomy. As shown in the present study, teacher collaboration, rather than teacher compliance, is what novice teachers look for. Particularly it is in a school setting where teachers, for example in the present study, can implement creative activities for students' needs, collaborate with fellow teachers, make use of the mandated Schemes of Work to suit their educational purposes, and are eager for teacher autonomy. Therefore, school districts and governments should become accountable to the opportunities for teachers to have power, responsibilities, and rights in exercising autonomy.

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