

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher Autonomy

Danuta Gabryś-Barker

Abstract A specific topic focus and other major concerns in preservice language teacher education, together with ways of enhancing teacher growth, are very strongly highlighted by European Union initiatives in education. Also various European agencies, such as, for example, the Council of Europe, have made a significant contribution to the development of educational guidelines and programs for language learners and language teachers. They all strongly voice the need to enhance teacher and learner autonomy by promoting, among other things, the concept of reflectivity and self-assessment in both language teaching and learning as key to the development of autonomy. This article looks at how a group of EFL preservice teachers perceive teacher autonomy as a construct, what factors contribute to these perceptions, and what the limitations and constraints on teacher autonomy pointed out by the trainees are. Becoming more aware of these views can contribute to improvement in training programs implemented in educational institutions concerned with FL teacher training. There seems to be a special need to focus more explicitly on developing the understanding of various dimensions of teacher autonomy and ways of achieving it, as teacher autonomy is at the heart of modern approaches to education and professional development.

1 Introduction

Globalization brought about by technological, social and economic changes created a context in which education has become an area of constant change and challenge. This challenge has to be answered by the way educationalists and, above all, teachers see themselves as harbingers of this change. Thus teacher training programs of the present have to respond to the need to create new learning environments that would, as Broadbent (2003, p. 111) puts it, “assist individuals to become proactive in reshaping their personal, professional, and recreational lives (...) to

D. Gabryś-Barker (✉)
University of Silesia, Sosnowiec, Poland
e-mail: danuta.gabrys@gmail.com

promote active open-mindedness and the capacity to be creative (...) to value the concept of lifelong learning (...) and to construct alternative visions of teaching and learning”. The function of teacher training programs is to make preservice teachers see their learning to teach as a constructive process of active involvement in creating knowledge personally relevant to themselves and promoting their “personal growth and change” (Broadbent, 2003, p. 111). This active involvement is conducive to teacher autonomy. Modern teacher training programs, such as the one introduced at the School of Education of the Australian Catholic University, assume that having completed the training course a preservice teacher will have developed the following attributes (Broadbent, 2003, pp. 111–112):

- being able to articulate a personal vision or philosophy;
- having a deep knowledge, critical understanding of, and enthusiasm for the intellectual content, discourses, and values associated with the disciplines from which the subjects they teach are derived, and as appropriate to the specific contexts within which they teach;
- holding high expectations and professional goals;
- being able to inspire the learning of others;
- displaying adeptness and discernment in the utilization of information technologies;
- valuing the individuality, diversity and contribution of others;
- displaying creative, constructive, and flexible thinking;
- valuing the continuum of learning (lifelong).

Each of the above attributes relates directly to teachers’ reflectivity and critical thinking which derive from the need to challenge existing beliefs, schemata and preexisting knowledge. Thus, they are attributes of an autonomous practitioner.

2 Council of Europe Programs for Teacher Development

A specific topic focus and other major concerns in preservice language teacher education as well as ways of enhancing teacher development are emphasized by the Council of Europe and constitute a significant contribution to the development of educational guidelines and programs for language learners and language teachers. They all strongly stress the need to enhance teacher and learner autonomy by promoting, among other things, the practice of reflectivity and self-assessment in both language teaching and learning. The following documents offer a comprehensive set of references and guidelines to this end:

- The *European language portfolio* (ELP) aims to promote learner-centered approaches to teaching in which self-assessment is vital; ELP is a practical tool for learner self-assessment. After an initial period of piloting, ELP has been adopted by some Polish schools, either being imposed by local educational authorities or embraced by individual teachers on their own initiative.

- The *European profile for language teacher education* (EPLTE) is a proposal for language teacher education in the 21st century, which makes suggestions concerning the “*structure* of educational courses, the *knowledge* and *understanding* central to foreign language teaching, the diversity of teaching and learning *strategies* and *skills* and the kinds of *values* language teaching should encourage and promote” (Kelly & Grenfell, 2004, www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/index.html).
- The *European portfolio for student teachers of languages* (EPOSTL) is “a document intended for students undergoing their initial teacher education which encourages them to reflect on the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages, helps them to assess their own didactic competences and enables them to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education” (www.ecml.at/mtp2/FTE).

It is appropriate to acknowledge the value of these documents, especially the last one (EPOSTL), as the most relevant to this discussion. The *European portfolio for student teachers of languages* is described by its authors as “[a] reflection tool for language teacher education” (<http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/FTE/>). It was created with the purpose of standardizing teacher education within the European Union. EPOSTL is not only a policy document but also a practical instrument for pre-service teachers of languages. It consists of three sections: *a personal statement*, a trainee’s reflection on what teaching involves, especially at the initiation stage; *a self-assessment*, a list of “can-do descriptors relating to didactic competences”; and *a dossier*, trainee teachers’ record of their progress and work done systematically. The aims of the EPOSTL as defined in the document are (www.ecml.at/mtp2/FTE/):

1. To encourage students to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences.
2. To help prepare students for their future profession in a variety of teaching contexts.
3. To promote discussion between students and their teacher educators and mentors.
4. To facilitate self-assessment of students’ competence.
5. To help students develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses related to teaching.
6. To provide an instrument which helps chart progress.
7. To serve as the springboard for discussions, topics for term papers, research projects etc.
8. To provide support during teaching practice and assist in discussions with mentors; this will help mentors to provide systematic feedback.

EPOSTL has been constructed with the idea that it should “be available to students at the beginning of their teacher education and it should accompany them throughout their teacher education, teaching practice and into their profession”

(www.ecml.at/mtp2/FTE). However, it should also be emphasized that EPOSTL is an important instrument for teacher trainers and mentors in their work with future teachers and should be regarded as playing “a useful complementary role to that of the *European profile for language teacher education*” (Gabryś-Barker, 2012).

3 Profile of a Preservice Teacher

The picture of preservice teachers that emerges across various studies and from my own research (see overview in Gabryś-Barker, 2012) seems to be fairly consistent on how this group of professionals-to-be is characterized. The findings almost unanimously show student teachers as a group of future professionals who go through near traumatic experiences in confrontation with their deeply-ingrained and idealistic view of the profession, invoking a disorienting contrast between the theory they acquired as a body of knowledge and what they are faced with as classroom reality. Perceptions of the classroom as imagined versus the reality experienced make trainees take a different stand than the one they usually intend—they struggle for ‘survival’ (Appel, 1995; Burden, 1980; Katz, 1979; Mok, 2005). Hence trainees’ major concerns focus on their own affectivity and the way they are seen by their mentors, their peers and, most of all, by students in the classroom. They are greatly concerned with building up their authority with their pupils, either by being overwhelmingly friendly or, contrastingly, extremely authoritarian and controlling. As theoretical knowledge fails, they tend to revert to the models of teaching known to them, their own teachers at different levels of education. Even though these models were often criticized by them, now they seem to offer a safe way of keeping face and ‘surviving’. With passing time, trainees’ motivations are exposed to challenges and may undergo certain changes or at least be severely shaken up, as their first expectations are not fully met. They become very technically oriented in their classroom concerns and focus on the techniques of teaching and how these can help them become real professionals, denying or neglecting their own needs, such as that, for example, for genuine satisfaction which would help to maintain an enthusiastic approach to teaching (Gabryś-Barker, 2008). Looking at the initial motivation to teach and become qualified teachers, the trainees express during their first experiences, Younger, Brindley, Pedder and Hagger (2004, p. 262) conclude: “Trainees’ own thinking at the start of their teacher training shows a sophisticated grasp of the type of teachers they aspired to become, based upon their models of outstanding teachers and the quality of the classroom practice they have experienced as pupils or observed as trainees”.

In many studies, trainee-teachers present themselves as idealistic and carrying out a mission, which is not, however, always well-grounded in their own individual teaching contexts (e.g., Gabryś-Barker, 2008). What seems most important in these narratives is that all the trainees see themselves as involved in a developmental process of:

- becoming more aware and more reflective, more creative and able to share their knowledge;
- becoming better able to share themselves as people with their own learners;
- revealing a very strong need to engage in reflection on themselves in their own classrooms (e.g., Gabryś-Barker, 2012; Younger et al., 2004) in which perhaps they do not go far enough into the topic; however, such reflections constitute a starting point for developing the reflective abilities of those trainees in the course of their studies and the practicum period at schools; the first step is developing awareness of this need and fostering the willingness to reflect.

Motivations to study to become a teacher are related to the main beliefs expressed by the student-teachers about teaching. Here they are described in order of frequency as:

- a mission to be accomplished;
- a highly specialist job requiring professionalism;
- sharing of knowledge developed through study and experience;
- performing a well-prepared role.

These systems of beliefs can be conceptualized as metaphors *of a victorious battle*, *a lighthouse showing the way in difficulties*, and *a guided tour or acting on the stage*. They derive from:

- models of former teachers that the trainees recover from their memory, mostly from primary and secondary level experiences—positive examples and, as such, copied by the trainees in their own classrooms, but also negative ones and, as such, rejected by them;
- students' own personality features which determine preferred styles of management and interaction with the learners;
- the new teaching experiences of trainees.

The major practical experiences of teaching influence evolving motivation to teach and also systems of beliefs previously held, now finally confronted with classroom reality. The majority of trainees see the period of school placement as extremely fruitful, but not without flaws. The major drawbacks as described in the studies (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002) derive from the different attitudes and different treatments which the institutions where the trainees are put provide. This mostly relates to the inadequacy of mentoring and mentor preparation and excessive control over the trainees-teachers, which is seen as very limiting and not sufficiently helpful as feedback and assistance. Also, as expected, the amount of teaching practice which is a prescribed part of the teaching module in the different teacher training institutions preservice teachers come from is always seen as insufficient. During this school period, trainees try out their theoretical knowledge and, becoming dissatisfied, first discard it and build their 'expertise' on a more intuitive and experiential basis. However, with time, they mostly modify their judgements by becoming more aware that perhaps it is not the flaws in the theory they are familiar with, but their own incomplete

knowledge in certain areas of teaching and its management or the specificity of a situation they find themselves in, that need to be tackled (Gabryś-Barker, 2012).

These attitudes of trainees can be read as important indicators of the way in which preservice preparation should be developed. Teacher educators and trainers should be aware of them, as they have major implications for the way training programs need to be constructed and how their general objectives should be formulated. Much attention should be paid to developing fully aware teachers, ones whose professional awareness comes not only from knowledge acquired from experience but also from ‘digesting’ it in reflection. Reflective teaching, primarily a focus on developing the ability to reflect at the preservice level, should be considered a major objective in creating successful teachers (Gabryś-Barker, 2012).

4 Becoming Reflective—Becoming Autonomous

Following Cole (2005, p. 131), it can be assumed that “[a]n effective teacher is someone who sees herself or himself as a learner. Teachers who evaluate and change their own practice to benefit their pupils are rewarding colleagues to work with. They make teaching a highly creative experience”. At the same time, what Loughran (1996, p. 25) sees as key to creating effective teachers when working with student-teachers on their professional development is the belief that “(...) teaching needs to be interactive and challenging as learning does not occur just by listening, it occurs by reconsidering one’s understanding through deeds, thoughts and actions. Therefore, so that student-teachers’ learning about teaching is meaningful, the teaching employed should challenge and motivate them to take steps to make new meaning from teaching and learning episodes”.

The understanding of the processes involved in teaching, comprehended as a learning process, derives from a conscious and structured reflection on these very processes. A lot has been written about reflectivity in educational contexts by, among many others, Loughran (1996), Moon (2004), and Pollard (2005), Pollard and Tann (1994), Posner (1989), Richards and Lockhart (1994), Schön (1987). The training programs and ways of developing reflectivity at the early stages of professional induction are of pivotal importance at the preservice stage, as this is still a learning stage and no habits have been established yet as to teaching routines. Thus, reflectivity has to be seen as a developmental process of learning about teaching, dependent on the individual characteristics of teachers, their styles of thinking and ways of learning—the more reflectivity, the more autonomy will be observed.

It can be safely assumed that the development of reflectivity in the teaching context of preservice teachers is not only theory-based, through the courses trainees attend, but it mostly means experiential learning at school where their practicum occurs (Gabryś-Barker, 2012). As Samuels and Betts (2007, p. 269) state, “[e]xperiences, whether in the context of work or personal lives, have the potential to be rich sources of learning. Through reflection we can explore experience so that it becomes a mental event we can play with, relive, and develop into future actions.

There is a potential to reflect on intentions as well as actions, thoughts and feelings". The role of reflection in professional contexts, such as in this case teaching, is seen in:

- creating an opportunity to confront knowledge learnt and knowledge created in use;
- establishing a personal meaning of an experience and interpretation of it;
- challenging beliefs and individually-made assumptions;
- facing challenges and uncertain situations;
- reexamining and building new knowledge based on experiential learning;
- avoiding routine and introducing new solutions to conflict, uncertain or unresolved situations and, thus developing teacher autonomy.

The ability to reflect and one's reflectivity are developmental, and can be exposed to formal instruction, both theoretical and practical, to attain higher levels of competence. Professional experience is to provide a grounding for this development. So, it may be assumed that different groups of teachers will exhibit different levels of reflectivity, depending on how long they have been in the profession and what training they have received. However, it is also crucial to bear in mind that reflectivity is not an automatically developed quality and even experienced teachers will not necessarily exhibit it (Gabryś-Barker, 2012).

5 Teacher Autonomy from the Preservice Teacher's Perspective—The Study

The study aimed at describing a group of EFL preservice teachers in terms of their understanding of the construct of teacher autonomy and factors which contribute to this understanding. As it is a data-driven study, no detailed research questions were posed. Inductive categories, based on the data collected from the subjects, constitute the basis for the analysis. The following inductive categories were identified in the data:

- definitions of teacher autonomy;
- a profile of an autonomous FL teacher;
- relations between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy;
- constraints on teacher autonomy;
- self-assessment in terms of degree of autonomy of the subjects participating in the study.

It is hoped that the findings of the study can contribute to improvement in training programs, which are implemented in FL teacher training institutions.

5.1 The Participants and the Tool

The participants of the study were 28 preservice teachers of English, still university students at the time when the data was collected. Their contact with teaching was mostly through the obligatory teaching practice they were involved in at the moment of study and, for most of them, one-to-one tutorials run on a private basis. They all seemed to be highly motivated to become teachers and thus were seriously involved in their professional development. What is more, their enthusiasm for teaching and becoming better with every lesson taught was openly expressed by them in personal communications. Their understanding of the construct of teacher autonomy was elicited in a free-form 400-word reflective essay on the topic: "Teacher autonomy from the perspective of a preservice EFL teacher". The students were asked to write the essay as part of their TEFL course requirements. As a follow up, it also served the purpose of discussing teacher autonomy in a seminar class.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 The Focus of Narratives

As expected, the subjects commented on teacher autonomy by, first of all, defining the concept as they understood it and characterizing an autonomous teacher. A significant part of the texts produced reflected upon the students' own exposure to teacher autonomy and the autonomous teachers they had met in their own learning time at primary and secondary schools. What was also strongly emphasized in the narratives was the relation between teacher and learner autonomy. The trainees commented on and evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of teacher autonomy in the preservice context. Teacher autonomy was described as influenced both by internal and external factors, most of which were seen as constraining its development. The quotations from the students' narratives provided below have not been altered in any way.

5.2.2 Defining Autonomy

By analogy with learner autonomy, which is a concept discussed extensively in teacher training programs at universities and other teacher training institutions, the trainees see teacher autonomy as independence from external factors and people involved in the educational process:

Preservice teachers who haven't had their school practice yet frequently think of being autonomous as not being dependent on the principal, school curriculum or anyone else (S1).

Teacher autonomy is freedom from control of others in teacher's professional development (S10).

It is important for teachers to be free from others (S14).

For some of the trainees, teacher autonomy is defined as one's awareness of choices and the changed perception of the concept of teaching and the teacher:

Teacher autonomy is first of all about changing the attitude towards teaching. A teacher is not a leader or 'dictator' during a lesson, but a facilitator. He is to assist and guide students (S14).

Teacher autonomy starts inside his/her mind and personal perception of learners, language, teaching and everything what he/she encounters at school while teaching (S17).

This independence or freedom, however, is not seen as the unlimited possibility of making one's own decisions concerning teaching but it implies full responsibility for the decisions made:

Teacher autonomy is the capacity and freedom but mostly responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching (S2).

The teacher should know responsibility for his/her own work and should take into account that what is given and presented to learners now will have its results in future (S27).

Teacher autonomy relates not only to responsibility for teaching and learners but also to one's professional development, the ability to self-direct it and self-evaluate its effectiveness by various means. At the same time, professional development is seen both as an individual process (via diary writing) and a cooperative one (by conducting action research):

Being an autonomous teacher (...) is the only way in which a teacher can develop his/her teaching skills and his/her language proficiency (S4).

Teacher autonomy involves flexibility, self-evaluation, self-directed teaching and professional development (S5).

Teacher autonomy characterizes itself by the teacher's willingness to extend and develop his knowledge all the time (...) not only the linguistic knowledge but also cultural and pedagogical. One of the most popular and effective ways to do it is action research in which he/she investigates the problem she/he has in order to improve teaching. Action research is collaborative (...) The teacher has to collaborate with the learners and colleagues (S20).

Teachers can also gather in groups to talk about teaching problems, materials and methods (S4).

Teacher autonomy also involves a high degree of flexibility expressed by designing creative and innovative techniques, tasks and materials and by allowing learners to participate in decision-making:

An autonomous teacher also looks for new materials and innovative techniques. Moreover, he or she allows the students to make their own decisions about their learning. In this way

not only a teacher develops his/her autonomy, but also enables his/her students to become autonomous (S4).

Teacher autonomy is an ability of creating a lesson without a lot of external aids (S19).

For all the subjects, teacher autonomy is inevitably associated with the role of reflection in one's own teaching:

Autonomous teachers involve elements of reflective teaching as well as they analyze cognitive and affective aspects of their lessons. (...) In other words, he/she is a kind of reflective practitioner who is able to evaluate himself/herself (S6).

Teacher autonomy implies responsibility and self-direction in the teaching process. It is, therefore, connected with reflection in teaching, since through reflection one may diagnose both the problems and the needs of one's learners in order to modify the teaching process (S7).

Autonomous teachers have a strong personal responsibility for their teaching. Their constant reflections and analysis have substantial influence on the teaching process (S22).

Autonomy is not only the feeling of responsibility for one's own learning and teaching, but also consciousness of one's imperfection and constant training (S24).

The trainees also define autonomy as a stage of being not only mature as a teacher but also having a unique personality and individuality, and perceiving this profession as one's calling (vocation):

Teacher autonomy is teacher maturity. An autonomous teacher is a person, who looks beyond the minimum. He/she has clearly stated goals, which are little higher than what is demanded from him/her (S17).

The key factors that come together to form what I call and what I perceive as teacher autonomy are a distinctive, unique personality that make a teacher stand out and make his lessons desirable (S16).

Teaching is his or her calling. He/she does not feel it as a burden but it is a way of developing his/her gifts, skills and passions (S24).

5.2.3 The Profile of an Autonomous Teacher

What follows from the above reflections on the concept of teacher autonomy is evident in the way trainees describe the profile of an autonomous teacher. First of all, the trainees characterize an autonomous teacher as someone who is fully competent as a professional:

The first aspect of the teacher's responsibility is being a competent teacher, that is a knowledge giver. Students should know that they can depend on their teacher (S24).

In my opinion, successful teacher is an autonomous teacher who has a strong sense of personal responsibility for his/ her teaching (...) he/she has to invest a lot of time and effort to develop his linguistic knowledge and pedagogical skills. This is helpful in building trust between the tea chef and the students (S25).

The teacher in order to be autonomous should possess a wide range of competences: psycholinguistic, pedagogical, pragmatic and discourse competence. All of them influence teacher autonomy and build confidence for that person (S27).

An autonomous teacher is also a teacher with a strong sense of responsibility and awareness of his or her own need for development, and who expresses a willingness to change through life-long education:

From the day I started working as a part-time teacher I have been striving for autonomy via self-reflection as I finally understood that as long as I am able to notice the problem, evaluate it, react and feel good with myself as a teacher despite the difficulties, I am on my way to achieve the goal of autonomy (S1).

One of constitutive traits of an autonomous teacher is his/her motivation and attitude to work:

Teacher's autonomy is his/her self-awareness, motivation and even empathy. When the teacher show empathy, he/she builds his/her image of a good teacher and a good person, because autonomous teacher equals autonomous person (S27).

Teacher autonomy, in my opinion, is also connected with his/her positive attitudes towards himself/herself, learners, teaching. (...) Also his/her attitude towards work means not perceiving it as something harmful and wasted time, but to be personally engaged and looking for exposure beyond the classroom (S17).

A strong emphasis is placed on the teacher's knowledge of his or her learners and attitudes towards them, and the ability to create a classroom atmosphere that facilitates the learning process and builds mutual respect between the teacher and the learners:

An autonomous teacher should be aware of his/her students, should not lack confidence, should be aware of eye-contact. An autonomous teacher knows classroom dynamics, knows that everyone has his/her place in the class (...) Moreover, the teacher's responsibility is to know his/her group (S27).

Autonomous teachers are able to create better atmosphere in the classroom (S26).

Also certain personality features are seen as more conducive to the development of one's autonomy:

(...) an autonomous teacher is characterized by risk-taking, self-determination, experimentation and inquiry (S10).

The autonomous teachers are powerful because they are self-confident and they love what they do. Their choice of profession was not accidental but conscious and deliberate (S18).

(...) the autonomous teacher is both independent and cooperative. S/he shares her/his experiences with the peers in order to both draw from their experiences and allow them to use hers/his (S15).

The trainees also value and see as indispensable the teacher's active involvement in school life and his or her taking an interest in its problems, actions clearly perceived as a sign of autonomy:

Another important issue of teacher autonomy, in my opinion, is his or her involvement in the pedagogical problems of the school, for example in the discussion on the topics of misbehavior, addictions and their effects on learners' health (S25).

In sum, an autonomous teacher must be a successful teacher, as autonomy leads to competence and competence leads to effectiveness in teaching.

5.2.4 Teacher Autonomy Versus Learner Autonomy

The perception of the interrelatedness of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy is very strongly expressed in all the narratives. The trainees hold the view that teacher autonomy leads to learner autonomy and only an autonomous teacher, as described earlier, can facilitate the development of autonomy in his or her learners:

(...) in self-directing our own teaching we have to account for the learners' needs and aid our students in the development of their own autonomy. Autonomous teaching and learning should always be interconnected and developed in cooperation of teachers and their students. It is only then that successful teaching and learning processes are ensured (S7).

Only an autonomous teacher is able to introduce the concept of autonomy to his or her students (S26).

Autonomy is a two-sided process and for a learner to be autonomous, the teacher also has to be autonomous (S20).

A teacher should be autonomous in order to teach his/her learners how to be autonomous (S21).

I think it is better to share autonomy with students (S23).

I am convinced that to develop learner autonomy it is necessary for the teacher to be autonomous (S15).

Teacher autonomy is necessary to teach students how to work on their own (S19).

Being convinced of the importance of teacher autonomy and often expressing their negative view of their own experience of non-autonomous teachers, the trainees perceive their training programs and seminar discussions as focusing extensively on learner autonomy, without a necessary focus on teacher autonomy and ways of developing it:

One thing is noticeable, there is much more thinking devoted to learners and learning process and too little about teachers and teaching process (S10).

Much is said and taught about learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is promoted and implemented during lessons but it is important to point out that teacher autonomy is most important (S14).

Although the concept of learner autonomy as responsibility for one's learning process is widely discussed, teacher autonomy is also crucial in the process of teaching and learning (S26).

5.2.5 Constraints on Teacher Autonomy

Generally speaking, the trainees believe that being a teacher offers more possibilities of being autonomous than any other profession:

I have more freedom in developing autonomy as a teacher that most other professionals have (S7).

Even preservice teachers are given the right to choose a coursebook, which would be best for the students. Even though teachers have to stick to their curriculum, they are free to use one method or another, they are given an opportunity to contribute to teaching by creating extra materials to help students in their language development (S8).

However, this freedom is not without constraints. These limiting factors come from both internal and external sources. The internal ones derive from teachers' perceptions of their own inadequacies, the amount of time and effort necessary to be autonomous and their unpreparedness to respond to the challenge of being autonomous:

Most teachers have to follow a certain curriculum and adjust the goals and procedures used to the requirements included in it (S7).

Developing teacher autonomy is difficult because we have to leave an easy way, which is for example conducting a lesson on the basis of a course-book and to create something new on our own. It is difficult and requires more effort (S19).

The comments made on external constraints relate mostly to institutions (schools), on the one hand, as the major agents inhibiting autonomy but, on the other, they are also seen as having the strongest power to facilitate the development of teacher autonomy:

I think that in present situation that are many barriers that unable teachers to be totally autonomous, for example pressure from the institution that makes teachers work under constraints of time, large classes, syllabus or examination demands (S10).

School policy should allow teachers to develop and let teachers to participate in a decision making process, because feeling of being needed and important is crucial not only for teachers but all people. I think that a teacher should have an opportunity to discuss and debate real school problems. Today speaking about school problems is a taboo, I am sure this should be changed. Educational system should provide optimal level of support, allowing teachers' voice (S21).

5.2.6 Preservice Teachers on Their Autonomy

The subjects see the development of teacher autonomy as a necessary but longitudinal process and emphasize the role of teaching experience in its development:

I think that novice teachers need time and experience in order to develop autonomy (S5).

Teacher autonomy should be developed carefully and should somehow be controlled by for example by the trainee's supervisor/mentor who as an more experienced teacher could give preservice teacher some useful tips and advise them (S8).

When describing autonomy in the preservice context, trainees present very diverse views. For some, it is the best time to develop their autonomy. For others, the perception of their own inadequacies seems to make them reluctant to implement what they perceive to be dangerously beyond routine activities and therefore untested as effective in classroom teaching. The first group of trainees were very enthusiastic about being able to make their own choices and found it an enjoyable experience:

First of all, teacher autonomy can be seen as a 'blessing' for preservice teachers, they can choose course-books, time and pace the lessons themselves. However, some preservice teachers are afraid of being autonomous. Making decisions or changing the course of the lesson when something goes wrong, frightens them. (...) Teacher autonomy has its pros and cons. It can be seen as a motivating factor but it can have a detrimental effect on preservice teachers, as well (S13).

Preservice teachers still being students know how to expand their knowledge by choosing ways of self-development. Furthermore, they can provide a good example for their students by showing that constant self-improvement is always profitable and motivating, whether you are still at school or you have already graduated and have a job (S3).

Preservice teachers have more opportunities to focus on self-directed teaching (S10).

Despite the totally positive attitude to teacher autonomy expressed in general comments, in the preservice context, the trainees seem very careful about endorsing the idea of being autonomous. Whereas one of the trainees believed that "Preservice teachers have the right to be autonomous" (S13), another one confessed: "I am not sure I have freedom" (S11). This skeptical or even negative attitude results from both internal and external factors:

A preservice teacher has full rights to be autonomous, however it is often the case that s/he is being checked and observed on a regular basis which is limiting very often his/her scope of possibilities. Young teachers being equipped with all sorts of novel methods and techniques have innovative ideas and concepts how a class should be conducted. Such innovations do not always go along with routines to which experienced teachers are used. They are often trying to impose their teaching style on a preservice teacher, not leaving him/her much space for being creative or spontaneous. On the other hand, many ideas on how to teach acquired during the studies need to be modified or adjusted and this is what only experienced teachers know because of their experience. Unfortunately, this limits a preservice teacher's sense of autonomy as their willingness to try out things on their own is put to a stop to some extent. I think it is important to let preservice teachers to make their own mistakes and learn from them (S13).

When preservice teachers start teaching their autonomy is challenged. Very often they are given the right to choose a course-book, which would be the best for the students. Even though a teacher has to stick to the curriculum, they are free to use a teaching method of their choice, they are given an opportunity to contribute to teaching by creating new materials (S8).

5.3 Preservice Teachers on Teacher Autonomy: A Summary

The picture of preservice teachers and their perceptions of teacher autonomy that appear in the study are quite positive. The trainees demonstrate full awareness of what teacher autonomy involves. Their understanding of the concept relates to autonomy as consisting in:

- a degree of independence in one's classroom practices but at the same time responsibility for one's actions;
- awareness of oneself as a teacher and awareness of learners and their needs;
- flexibility in designing lessons, choice of materials and classroom management but all this firmly grounded in professional competence deriving from knowledge and experience;
- active involvement in professional development through reflection and experimentation with new techniques, materials and procedures, verified in action research projects carried out individually or cooperatively with colleagues;
- being mature and developing a unique individuality as a teacher.

An autonomous teacher is described 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. Certain personality features of a teacher make him or her more predisposed to becoming autonomous in the eyes of the trainees. These mostly relate to teacher affectivity and more precisely his or her self-esteem and self-confidence. Low self-esteem and lack of confidence, together with inadequacies of professional competence and experience, are seen by the trainees as major constraints on development of their autonomy at the preservice stage. Additionally, external factors such as their mentors' or supervising teachers' rigid control during the period of school placement are seen by the trainees as limiting their readiness to be more autonomous and act beyond what may be seen as routine and safe behavior in their classroom practice. This, however, does not mean that they are not willing to be more autonomous and do not find a certain degree of enjoyment when it is allowed. It is believed that autonomy will come with experience and the teaching conditions under which preservice teachers become in-service teachers. Thus, it is seen as a longitudinal process that is somewhat ahead of them and not necessarily starting at the preservice stage.

6 Conclusions

Creating facilitative conditions for preservice teachers' autonomy and positive (but constructive at the same time) feedback offered by mentors will allow these trainees to feel more secure. As this lack of security is a governing factor, it causes reversion to familiar tried-and-tested models of teaching, which may not be very stimulating

for either teachers or learners. This lack of stimulation could well result in a more passive attitude to one's development and harmful falling into routine at the start of one's professional life. Although initial attempts at autonomy or finding one's own ways in the classroom may result in failure and thus undermine the initially quite idealistic picture of the teaching profession a preservice teacher holds, it is necessary to make it clear that failure is part of future success. As stated earlier, trainees focus on the technicalities of teaching (methods, techniques, etc.), but being deprived of challenges to be creative and innovative might lead to being just a skillful but unenthusiastic teacher, one who is resistant to change. This can result in burn-out, as routine inevitably leads to it. Initial inspiration based on admiration for model teachers will disappear and personal satisfaction from teaching will diminish.

What implications for us as teacher trainers does the picture of preservice teachers as represented in this study have? First of all, the trainees' emphasis on the lack of teacher autonomy as a topic in their training program is a legitimate indication that it should be introduced and discussed together with some guidelines on how to develop it, what advantages it offers to a teacher and how to cope with the constraints and barriers a teacher faces in his or her attempt to be autonomous. Also, in the preparation for teaching practice at school, trainees should be made aware of what the scope and limitations of their autonomy as preservice teachers are. At the same time, mentors and supervisors should see themselves as facilitators of preservice teacher autonomy by showing ways of developing autonomy and, more importantly, of dealing with fear, feelings of low self-esteem and possible failure in the trainee's attempts to be independent. In other words, preparation for teacher autonomy should have both cognitive and affective dimensions.

Unfortunately, what emerges very strongly from this study is the trainees' declared belief that they have been limited in their attempts to become more autonomous by their mentors and/or supervisors. Undoubtedly, the actions taken by these mentors and supervisors have their own grounding, but what the comments in this study show is that the feedback given to the trainees is neither very informative nor encouraging. A preservice teacher, still a student himself or herself, needs a lot of encouragement to go beyond the old established ways and try out new things in his or her first encounters with a school and students in class. On a positive note, what is important is that these trainees see teacher autonomy as an attribute of a successful teacher and, as one of them said, teacher autonomy leads to development of professional competence, which in turn makes a teacher an effective practitioner in the classroom.

To conclude, it seems that the way we, teacher trainers and mentors, deal with our trainees' autonomy is either not encouraging enough (to say nothing of negative responses to the trainees' attempts to be autonomous) or the issue of trainees' autonomy does not come up at all in the feedback we give to them. Thus, they more often than not come to see teacher autonomy as irrelevant at this stage of their professional development and it is only perceived at this time as an important attribute later on in their professional careers. Of course, this not a very positive picture is not always true, as I am sure that some of us do emphasize the role of teacher autonomy and see induction to it at the preservice stage as obligatory, but as

the testimony of the subjects in this study suggests, this is often not the case. Thus, as much as we emphasize learner autonomy, we should do the same with teacher autonomy both in our training programs and in our school practice.

References

- Appel, J. (1995). *Diary of a language teacher*. London: Heinemann.
- Broadbent, C. (2003). Thinking globally: Preparing preservice teachers for classrooms of the 21st century. In A. Putkiewicz & A. Wilkomirska (Eds.), *Problems of teacher education in rolling changes of educational system all over the world* (pp. 110–130). Warszawa: University of Warsaw Press.
- Burden, P. W. (1980). *Teachers' perceptions of the characteristics and influences on their personal and professional development*. Manhattan, KS: Author. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 198087).
- Cole, M. (2005). *Professional values and practice. Meeting the standards* (3rd ed.). London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Gabryś-Barker, D. (2008). The research orientation and preferences of preservice EFL teachers. In M. Pawlak (Ed.), *Investigating English language learning and teaching* (pp. 31–48). Poznań, Kalisz: Wydawnictwo UAM.
- Gabryś-Barker, D. (2012). *Reflectivity in preservice teacher education: A survey of theory and practice*. Katowice: University of Silesia Press.
- Hascher, T., Cocard, E., & Moser, P. (2004). Forget about theory—practice is all? Student teachers' learning in practicum. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 10, 623–637.
- Katz, L. (1979). *Helping others learn to teach: Some principles and techniques for in-service educators*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education.
- Kelly, M., & Grenfell, M. (2004) *The European profile for language teacher education (EPLTE)*. www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/index.html. Accessed on March 15, 2011.
- Loughran, J. (1996). *Developing reflective practice. Learning about teaching and learning through modeling*. London, Washington DC: The Falmer Press.
- Mok, Y. F. (2005). Teacher concerns and teacher life stages. *Research in Education*, 73, 53–72.
- Moon, J. A. (2004). *Reflection in learning and professional development theory and practice*. London, New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Pollard, A., & Tann, S. (1994). *Reflective teaching in the primary school. A handbook for the classroom* (2nd ed.). London, New York: Cassell Publications & The Open University.
- Pollard, S. (2005). *Reflective teaching*. London, New York: Continuum.
- Posner, G. J. (1989). *Field experience. Methods of reflective teaching*. New York, London: Longman.
- Richards, J., & Lockhart, Ch. (1994). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Samuels, M., & Betts, J. (2007). Crossing the threshold from description to deconstruction and reconstruction: Using self-assessment to deepen reflection. *Reflective Practice*, 8, 269–283.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Wilson, S. M., Floden, R. E., & Ferrini-Mundy, J. (2002). Teacher preparation research. An insider's view from the outside. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53, 190–204.
- Younger, M., Brindley, S., Pedder, D., & Hagger, H. (2004). Starting points: Student teachers' reasons for becoming teachers and their preconceptions of what this will mean. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 27, 245–264.