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Dissertation review

Assessment of the Ph.D. dissertation submitted by **Haishen YU**

Titled: “**Strategies for Student Autonomy in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language in Poland and China. Comparative studies**”

Written under the supervision of Prof. dr hab Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak and the auxiliary promotor Dr **Barbara Muszyńska**

For many years, autonomy has played an extremely important role in education, as evidenced by the huge number of publications and research around the world. The enormous changes have occurred also in the approach to language teaching over the last several years and the increasing importance of shaping the attitude of independence and independence in the learning process is widely emphasizes. However, some teachers are still convinced that the results of external examinations are largely a reflection of their efforts in the teaching process, and many students still feel an additional burden due to the constant feeling of being judged. On the other hand, teachers' and learners' autonomy is perceived as one of the necessary conditions for successful education and their personal growth. Its definitions emphasize the ability to recognize one's own strengths and weaknesses, to identify own needs and goals, and to apply one's own strategies to achieve these goals.

The Author of the dissertation distinguishes various categories of autonomy and dependence that might be called, with reference to Aharon Aviram's¹, institutional autonomy (i.e., the

¹ Aviram A. (2000), *Autonomia i zaangażowanie: dopełniające się ideały*, tłum. G.T.Wysocka, “Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Nauki Humanistyczno-Społeczne. Socjologia Wychowania XI”, nr 339, s. 79-94.

independence and freedom of action granted to an individual by an empowered group) and psychological autonomy (obtained through certain personality traits). The Ph.D. Candidate tries to answer whether and to what extent it is possible to develop the student's autonomy at various levels of education in the Polish and Chinese educational contexts, as well as he attempts to evaluate techniques and strategies that can help achieve this goal.

Introduction

The dissertation comprises 178 pages including final conclusions and a summary, plus a list of references (10 pages), appendices, and lists of charts, tables, and photos; and is divided into seven chapters. It starts with an acknowledgement, table of contents and introduction.

The title of the dissertation is well-designed, and the contents entirely refer to it.

The theoretical part

In the first chapter, the Author gives a clear literature review concerning autonomy and its reference to education. The definitions and explanations of the term are carefully selected and build a complete image of the central theme of the dissertation. The Author's attempt to develop his theoretical framework based on his studies as well as practice is worth emphasising. The framework clarifies the idea's further development and structures the dissertation reasonably. However, the relationship between autonomy and global competencies in inclusive education is unclear. The Author tried to tangle those three terms, but his explanation of the ties is not convincing. His attempt needed more precise definitions of global competencies and inclusive education, focusing on autonomy and responsibility over students' learning. Thus, subchapter 1.2 too quickly shifts from one term to another and explains only the need for an intercultural approach to research.

On the other hand, I highly value a range of theories and the careful presentation of various approaches to autonomy development. I particularly appreciate the introduction of Jonassen's stages of knowledge acquisition and Vygotsky's theory of children's development as the background for the research framework.

I would, however, expect a greater variety of literature and analysis of the idea of learning strategies. The Author uses only Rebecca L. Oxford's studies (pp. 35-37) and does not provide any other classifications. The idea would have been better presented if the Author had used various sources and indicated different opinions.

The next chapter (2) describes the theoretical foundations of the research. The Author fully covers the topic and discusses it extensively. He presents and comments on several perspectives: political philosophy, critical pedagogy, and constructivism. Such a broad understanding of the theme makes the discussion comprehensive and valuable.

In summary, the **theoretical part** is well-written and provides a good background for understanding the rest of the dissertation.

The methodological part

Chapter 3 discusses the research's main foundation, structure and procedure. The Author carefully presents his research methodology, starting from the substantiation of using the qualitative paradigm and ethnography. Next, he states what the research aims and questions are. They all are logical and suitable for the chosen title of the dissertation. What we might expect, and is not easily seen in the questions, is an explanation that the learning strategies (being the research subject) refer to ESL teaching and learning. But, because it is mentioned in the aim, we may guess the intention easily.

For the research tools, the Author chose observation of classroom learning and guided interviews which seem reasonable and provide much data. However, I have a doubt concerning the unequal number of observations as the Author observed 31 classes in Poland and 26 in China, as well as 8 teachers in Poland and 6 in China. There needs to be more information on whether the unequal numbers related to the saturation of the research categories or were intentional. The Author also mentions some additional ways of data collection in China (p. 52), such as interviews with private school teachers (no number is given, which is a mistake), observation of his son and wife, and information from propaganda media. The sources are valuable and provide much insight into the Chinese education system. However, I would have expected additional data sources referring to the Polish education system mainly because the Author does not have much experience learning in Poland. I could only find the information about the Author's "*free talk with some students during class breaks*" (p.84).

The other weakness of the dissertation is a lack of the target group description. A good idea would be to add a table with data concerning the learners (e.g., their number, age or class, and the type of school) and the teachers (types of school, age, teaching experience etc.).

Only some fragments of the information could be found in several parts of the dissertation (e.g., observations in Poland were done in grades 7 and 8 of primary school and grade 3 in junior secondary school, p. 84)

However, there is no information about the teachers being observed and interviewed. What is more, the information that parents were interviewed as well, appears only once in the dissertation (p.169) and needs further explanation.

I highly value the Author's way of developing his research framework, again logically and comprehensively, based on carefully selected studies. The decisions concerning the selection of theories and theoretical foundations show the Author's vast knowledge and great familiarity with the subject literature. In all methodological and theoretical chapters, the Author skilfully navigates between various theories, approaches and understanding of the central concept – autonomy. He shows logical relations between theory and his decisions referring to research procedures and methodology, as well as how he describes the research (e.g., he informs the readers where to find research findings referring to specific research questions). The same logic is seen in the following chapters (4 – 7), presenting the educational background and the learning strategies of students, teachers, and institutions.

Research findings analysis and interpretation

Chapter 4 presents general information about Polish and Chinese educational systems to show how teachers and students are positioned in a broader academic environment. It is a pity that the Author presents the Polish education system in reference to one source only (Eurydice); however, he at least attempts to expand the descriptions with commentaries and critical analysis of the realities of reform implementation in Poland.

An essential part of the dissertation within each analytical chapter is the final discussion of similarities and differences between Polish and Chinese educational aspects. All of them are arranged by the assigned research categories. I want to emphasise the high value of these analyses and their significance for the dissertation.

Nonetheless, the value of subchapter 4.3.1. is questionable, as it is mainly developed based on a single example (Zhao Yang). It is not a scientific approach and lowers the value of the chapter.

I also have doubts concerning several issues discussed in the following chapters/ subchapters. The Author treats extra classes as metacognitive strategies. Still, as he writes, "*the decision to take extra classes is mostly made by their parents*" (p.79), and these are the teachers who decide whether and what exercise book learners should buy, as well as plan what tasks are performed. These situations prove that extra classes do not refer to students' learning strategies. To explore the strategies, the Author should have focused on students' interests in the additional classes

and their strategies concerning thinking and behaviour during the classes. The general information about attending extra classes may support the discussion of learners' autonomy only because they are not the ones who decide to attend the classes. So, the Author should not associate extra classes with learners' metacognitive strategies.

In subchapter 6.1.1. I can see again the above-mentioned weakness: the Author uses data concerning testing as a metacognitive strategy. Again, I do not agree with the intention of using tests and formative assessment as metacognitive learning strategies. On the contrary, metacognition helps learners take control of their own learning, and a teacher's role in the development of learners' metacognitive skills is different from assigning them tests. There should have been put more focus on the students' self-awareness of their individual learning experiences than on the formal assessment. Although the Author attempts to investigate the students' views, what he notices poorly demonstrates the students' metacognitive skills.

In my opinion, the Author has not been able to find proper evidence concerning the development of learning in the classrooms and he, almost forcefully, has sought confirmation that these strategies exist. It would have been a better idea to show how weak educational systems are in this matter. Consequently, the dissertation would have increased in reliability. However, the weakness has probably been caused by the lack of experience in researching and it shows the Ph.D. Candidate's strong motivation to find what he planned to find. He lacks the courage of an experienced researcher who can clearly criticize the educational reality under study and point out to the shortcomings of the system. Several ideas which were meant to show autonomous learning strategies, actually exemplify a lack of autonomy and strong dependence on formal decisions. I would expect in this subchapter the Author's immediate comment explaining the situation, unfortunately, it is missing here. However, the comments are at least present in the final conclusion.

In the first parts of the dissertation the Ph.D. Candidate distinguishes three stages of learner autonomy: dependent autonomy, interdependent autonomy, and independent autonomy. It seems a very good decision, but the terms should have been more exposed in the following chapters. In this way, they would have helped interpret the data and form a framework for the analysis. At the same time, the use of the stages in chapters 5-7 would strengthen the Author's opinion about the level of autonomy seen in the collected data.

Generally, I can see inconsistent choices of categories used for comparison. I suppose the Author wishes to describe only the main strategies that appear in both countries. It is reasonable in ethnography; however, the comparative component of the dissertation suggests that the Author should have at least mentioned the same processes classified as learning

strategies. This procedure would help the Author emphasise the differences between Polish and Chinese education.

I highly value the interpretation of the research findings in general. The collected material is very interesting and abundant, and the conclusions are valuable. The Doctoral Student presents his deep understanding of the literature referring to the subject of the dissertation and shows a clear connection between the theory and his own research.

Technical aspects

Language and style: The Author shows a good command of the English language. The dissertation is written in a stylistically rich and scientific language.

The layout of the dissertation is clear and logical. The work structure follows the research procedure, making the message clear and easy to comprehend.

References: The literature is carefully referenced, and a comprehensive bibliography contains all the relevant papers for the field.

Final remark and conclusion

The Author dared to compare two education systems with considerable differences in teaching approaches, learning experience and, generally, working culture. It was a difficult and demanding task but well performed.

I highly value the choice of the theme for the dissertation. Common belief in the necessity to develop learners' independence in acquiring a foreign language does not cause huge changes in educational reality, and the dissertation clearly reveals the weaknesses of education systems in both countries – Poland and China. The Author shows how necessary it is to disseminate the idea of autonomy and the available tools that could contribute to achieving this goal.

The dissertation offers a significant contribution to international educational and pedagogical studies. Despite some weaknesses, the PhD Candidate provided convincing and valuable study findings, and their interpretation reached a good scientific level. The shortcomings result principally from the uncertainty of an inexperienced researcher.

In my opinion, the dissertation fully deserves to be accepted as a fulfilment of the requirements of a doctoral degree. I recommend it as a subject of further procedure.

Agnieszka Sypit