

## On Promotion of Students' Autonomy in China's College English Classroom

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### Abstract

With exposure of weaknesses of the traditional classroom practice, it has been realized that students' autonomy needs to be promoted. To achieve this, both teachers' and students' awareness has to be raised in the context of China. The cultural tradition needs to be broken and the role of teachers needs to be shifted. Students' autonomy can also be fostered through classroom interaction in China's College English teaching.

**Key words:** Promotion; Autonomy; College English classroom

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### INTRODUCTION

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For many years, College English teaching in China 'has been dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory' (Rao, 2006). However, with the acceleration of China's steps of development and closer ties with the outside world, more and more weaknesses of this teaching practice have been exposed. Many students find it difficult to be understood in an interview when hunting for a job. Having been accustomed to relying on teachers' instructions, students tend to be passive in learning and do not know how to improve after graduation. To solve these problems and achieve the objectives of the syllabus, a new direction has to be adopted. Autonomy, as a goal

of language teaching, has become an inevitable trend. This paper, based on a critical look at the traditional classroom practice, attempts to explore how to promote more effective teaching-learning in the context of China by introducing the concept of autonomy from sociocultural perspective.

Autonomy is a concept that was first introduced into language teaching by Holec. Holec (1981) defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning' and 'an ability or a capacity that needs to be acquired'. Autonomy is regarded as a 'pedagogical goal' by Wenden (1987) and 'an unavoidable methodological option' by Narcy (1994). In sociocultural field, Little (1999a, p.4) defines autonomy as a capacity 'for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action'. This capacity 'includes the planning, monitoring, and evaluating of learning activities and involves both the content and process of learning'(Little, in Paiva & Braga, 2008, p.2 ).

Students' autonomy is 'the product of an interactive process' (Little, 2007) and thus can be gained through the class interaction. As can be seen from the perspective of socio-interactive view, the development of competence derives from the 'interchange between organisms and environments' (Rose, 1997). Class is like a small society in which the students can gradually develop their autonomy through the two-way interaction. Students' autonomy doesn't mean that the teachers will 'relinquish all initiative and control' (Little, 1999a, p.3). According to sociocultural theory, the development of students' autonomy is a process involving a gradual shift from other regulation to self-regulation. At first, the teachers may provide a lot of assistance. Gradually, teachers reduce their 'scaffolding' (Mitchell & Myles, 1998) until students are eventually able to take the responsibility for strategic functions of a certain task. In the process of achieving autonomy, besides the teachers, the peer students can also scaffold each other through the Zone

of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined by Vygotsky (1978:76) as: '...the distance between the actual level of development as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.' The basis of students' autonomy is that the students accept responsibility for their learning (Little, 1995). Cultivation of students' autonomy is a gradual transfer from shared responsibility to individual responsibility. Negotiation plays an important role in this respect. Negotiation means 'discussions that take place between people who have different interests, in order for them to be able to come to an agreement about something, solve a problem, or make arrangements' (Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary, in Benson & Voller, 1997) This also involves a transfer from joint problem-solving to independent problem-solving. Besides this, mediation in target language or teachers' personal construct are also very important in achieving students' autonomy.

## 1. NECESSITY OF PROMOTING STUDENTS' AUTONOMY

The traditional College English classroom in China is mainly a teacher-dominated one, in which students listen to teachers and take notes but seldom ask questions. The teaching method usually adopted is the Grammar-translation Method. In class, Teachers focus on the explanation of grammar rules and word usage. While analyzing the text, teachers translate the passage word by word or sentence by sentence. So, the mother tongue is used a lot. The role of the teachers is mainly a 'purveyor of information' (Little, 1995). Teachers try to give students as much information as possible in the fixed time. What the students do is put down the notes and memorize the language points, with a belief that most of them will appear in the examination. They depend on teachers too much. Besides what the teachers ask, they do not know and will not think about what else they should do. In class, it is usually the teachers who initiate questions and the students answer. When asked individually, the students will stand up and timidly speak out the answer. This may have to do with cultural factors. There is not much interaction in class, for the teachers believe that any other activity is a waste of time and that they may make full use of the time to give students more knowledge. Cultivated in this traditional classroom, students are quite good at dealing with grammar. They develop high linguistic competence; Being immersed in the mother tongue, students have little difficulty in understanding the abstract terms. There will not be such a phenomenon that the teacher tells a joke but the students do not laugh.

However, more and more weaknesses of this kind of teaching practice have been exposed nowadays. Due to

lack of class interaction, students find it so boring that they can not concentrate for a long time in class. For some, they will even gradually become tired of English learning. Fostered in this kind of classroom, students can perform well in the written exam but find it difficult to be understood when communicating with native speakers; Having been used to depending on teachers, students become passive, obedient and lacking in initiative in learning and do not know what to do without the teacher. Zhang's (2005) words can well express the situation of language teaching: 'the traditional way of teaching English ... is just like trying to teach people to swim without getting in the water'. To change the situation, a new way of teaching has to be adopted. Students' autonomy needs to be promoted.

## 2. WAYS OF PROMOTING STUDENTS' AUTONOMY IN COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

In language teaching, how to promote students' autonomy? Teachers play a very important role in achieving this. In the context of China, the following aspects need to be taken into consideration by the teachers:

### Raising Both Teachers' and Students' Awareness and Involving Students in Material Selection

The broad environment in China allows autonomy-centered teaching. It is true that teaching is required to be oriented by the syllabus and textbooks are selected by the university. But the fact is that the syllabus has been made to encourage autonomy-centered teaching and that more freedom has been given in the selection of textbooks. The syllabus has been formulated in 2004, and students' autonomy has been clearly set as a goal of College English teaching (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004). However, the problem is that there is no full awareness about the promotion of students' autonomy among teachers. Most teachers still stick to the traditional teaching model, based on the belief about the past experience. How to change this kind of situation? That depends on teachers' 'personal constructs', for 'teacher autonomy is a precondition of learner autonomy' (Little, 1999a, p.22). To develop students' autonomy, teachers have to start from themselves, reflecting their own beliefs, practices, experiences, and so on. Teachers should first make themselves psychologically ready for the new teaching model. Here, what teachers should do is change the old way of teaching and at the same time arouse students' awareness by informing them of the goal of syllabus. Thus, the students can set their own short-term learning goals, sometimes with scaffolding from the teacher, to achieve the ultimate goal of autonomy step by step. This can be seen as a kind of 'reactive autonomy', which is the preliminary level of self-regulation. 'This

is the kind of autonomy which does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.' (Littlewood, 1999)

Nowadays, in most universities of China, front-line teachers' suggestions are taken into consideration in selecting textbooks. However, considering the big size of students, it is difficult for the students' viewpoints to be heard in the selection of textbooks. So, how to involve the students in? As teachers, there is also something to do to give more autonomy to the students in this situation. The negotiation of textbook selection can be practiced in a special way. The teachers may first have a small discussion with students before giving the feedbacks to the authority of the university so that students' voice can also be heard in an indirect way. As to the selection of supplementary materials, the authority of the university usually do not interfere with it. It is the front-line teachers who have the full rights to make such a decision. It is a good chance for teachers to fully involve students in through negotiation. In this way, the students may feel that they are responsible for their own learning. Then students' autonomy will be gradually developed. As stated by Little, et al. (2003, p.4), students 'take their first step towards autonomy when they recognize that they are responsible for their own learning.'

### **Breaking Cultural Tradition and Realizing the Shift of Teacher Role**

The traditional teaching, undoubtedly, has its cultural root. China has long been influenced by the thoughts of Confucius. As students, they have a tradition of respecting for the authority. As Ho and Crookall (1995) state, this also has something to do with face, 'Chinese students have a great respect for and wish to maintain their teacher's mien-tzu (face)' and meanwhile, 'With similar concern for mien-tzu, the teacher is also reluctant to admit any inadequacies on his/her part'. But do Chinese students really want to obey? Littlewood (2000) has done a survey, finding that the stereotype of Chinese students' obedience 'does not reflect the roles they would like to adopt in class' and that students 'do not want to sit in class passively receiving knowledge'. Therefore, there's a need to break the cultural tradition and change the teacher role.

In autonomy-centered classroom, teachers should act as facilitators, counselors, and resources (Benson & Voller, 1997). Higgs (1988, p.55) argues that 'autonomous learning is inconsistent with the teacher being the principal/sole power and control'. But, considering the deep influence of culture, it can not be expected to be too quick in the transfer of teacher roles and teachers have to hand over their control in small steps. For example, when doing a task in class, the teachers may still contribute a lot at the very beginning, and try to reduce control or scaffolding little by little until the students are eventually able to take the full responsibility. In doing so,

the students' self-regulation can be gradually achieved through the process of other-regulation. However, the gradual transfer of responsibility does not mean that teachers give up all the control. In class, the teacher still participates in the classroom activities and acts as 'a joint negotiator' (Breen & Candlin, 1980) to negotiate the activities, guiding the students who have different interests to reach an agreement.

### **Fostering Students' Autonomy Through Classroom Interaction**

To change the traditional 'I teach, you listen and write' method in class, the class activities have to be enriched. 'Activity is defined in terms of sociocultural settings in which collaborative interaction, intersubjectivity, and assisted performance occur...' (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). In class, group work is preferred. When doing a task, students can be divided into small groups. Teachers have to move from group to group and give them scaffolding. At the very beginning, many students may not be very competent in doing the activity because of the old tradition. So, teachers have to provide a lot of assistance. For example, when doing the activity of picture description, teachers may give a lot of hints, guiding them to work out when, where and what has happened. Teachers can also pick out one of the pictures and describe it in detail for the students to imitate. Gradually, teachers may reduce the scaffolding, giving students fewer and fewer hints until they are able to do it independently someday. Thus, students' autonomy can be achieved through their ZPD, which, as Lantolf (2000) claims, 'involves interaction between an expert and a novice in which the expert eventually transmits an ability to the novice through social interaction'. In addition, in class, teachers should relinquish the old way of teaching by word-to-word translation and try to use target language in the classroom interaction. Language is a tool for mediation. Students' cognition can be gradually developed by being pushed to think in the target language.

Little (1999b) argues that students should be involved in the whole process of 'setting learning goals, planning and monitoring learning activities, and evaluating learning outcomes'. In class, teachers should try to create some opportunities for students to do so. For example, at the beginning of each class, teachers may give students several minutes to come to the stage and do oral presentation. What should be covered completely depends on the students. They may choose to present some background knowledge of the passage, comment on a piece of news, or share with others their own experience, etc. Of course, considering that students are now still very dependent, teachers may assign this as group work first. Students work together to set their goal through negotiation. During this process, the less able students can be scaffolded by others who are much more capable, thus leading to success of the activity. Little by little,

students will be capable of managing this individually. This process involves the transfer from regulation of peers to self-regulation. After the presentation, teachers can also try to guide students to evaluate their own performance. Thus, students will be gradually 'able to take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired' (Holec in Littlewood, 1999).

Developing students' autonomy is a big topic. Besides what have been discussed above, there are also some other ways for teachers to adopt. For example, teachers may ask students to do reflection writing at the end of each class. Leni Dam (1998) also suggests some ways like writing learners' diaries, teacher's diary or posters, and so on. In addition, teachers may make full use of internet and email, for example, to get the feedback from students and meanwhile give them suggestions. Teachers may also create a forum for the indirect teacher-students interaction after class. Teaching is a constant process of exploration. More new ways have to be worked out in teaching to effectively promote autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

With exposure of weaknesses of the traditional classroom practice, autonomy, as a goal, is coming into the field of language teaching. This paper, beginning with a brief discussion of the concept of autonomy and a critical evaluation of the traditional language classroom practice, attempts to explore how to effectively promote students' autonomy in China's College English Classroom. Based on the practical situation of China's universities, this paper highlights three points: raising both teachers' and students' awareness and involving students in material selection; breaking cultural tradition and realizing the shift of teacher role; fostering students' autonomy through classroom interaction. Developing students' autonomy is a long process and needs teachers' constant exploration.

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