Abstract

A pedagogical experiment carried out since 2000 places the emphasis on the student and his specific needs and motivations, and is designed to free him from the traditional pedagogical limitations. It is both self-initiated and group-initiated, with support provided by the ‘teaching’ staff. In this system, individual work alternates with group work, which focuses on the production of a collective ‘programme’ or task corresponding to the set of objectives defined by the members of the group. This enables students to master the social functions of language. Thus learning becomes an active and creative process of language acquisition.

In common with all courses taught at Chongqing University, College English course is organized on a semester based credit-system. Like most universities in China, all students leaving our university are required to pass a minimum level test (College English Test, Band 4) in order to obtain their corresponding specialty degree. This test has been designed at a level comparable with the ‘threshold level’ proposed by the Ministry of Education. Students learning College English have generally already studied English for six to ten years, and come from all departments of the University with different needs, objectives, and levels.

When we took over responsibility for the course for first-year university students, we were faced with various difficulties. Though closely interlinked in their effects, the causes of the difficulties encountered could be classified in the following way: first and foremost, the type of learner was at the time not very clearly defined, and the students’ motivations and precise needs had never been analysed; secondly, the pedagogy used was a mere adaptation of traditional secondary school methodology, without any apparent justification, and without any deep-rooted attempt to adapt it to the new context. The result was growing absenteeism and a lack of interest in the course. It was thus necessary to effect profound changes in the teaching of College English, and this
led to a research programme which was based on the theory of autonomy.

Autonomy refers to ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec 1981: 3). Self-directed learning, which is often used interchangeably with autonomy, is defined as ‘the techniques used in order to direct one’s own learning’ (Pemberton 1996: 3). It refers to ‘learning in which the learners themselves take responsibility for their own learning’ (Thomson 1996: 78). Autonomy, therefore, is a capacity, while self-directed learning is a way of organizing learning (Pemberton 1996: 3). In this article I shall describe the self-directed programme, and evaluate its outcomes.

**Needs analysis of the programme**

In order to steer the right course, the design of the learning programme takes into account a number of factors which are crucial to the development of learner autonomy:

**Learner choice** Learner choice is essential to autonomous learning. Holec (1981) states that learner autonomy consists in making decisions in learning, including setting objectives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring the procedure, and evaluating the outcome of learning. Learner choice implies that students can work at their own pace, deciding on questions of what, when, how, and how often.

**Voluntariness** Voluntariness is a pre-requisite for independent language learning. Students who are coerced into joining a self-directed learning programme may not benefit as much as those who volunteer (Lee and Ng 1994).

**Flexibility** Learners need a supportive environment in order to learn to be more independent. One important criterion for establishing a supportive environment is flexibility in learning (Esch 1996). Flexibility in a self-directed learning programme means that students can change options (e.g. objectives, contents, process of learning) according to their needs and interests.

**Teacher instruction** The teacher plays an important role in facilitating the process of re-orientation and personal discovery, which is a natural outcome of self-directed learning (Kelly 1996). It is crucial for the teacher to establish a good relationship with students, supporting and guiding them in their learning, e.g. by helping them formulate their goals more clearly, and providing feedback, encouragement, and reinforcement.

**Peer collaboration** Learner autonomy is not only individual but also social. It entails ‘a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person’ (Dam 1995: 1). Learning ‘does not take place in a vacuum and that self-direction does not necessarily imply learning on one’s own’
(Pemberton 1996). Interaction, negotiation, collaboration, etc., are important factors in promoting learner autonomy.

So, several questionnaires, enquiries, meetings, and interviews were organized with the different parties involved in the College English teaching process at Chongqing University. Examples of such contacts are given below.

1. Individual interviews were held with the dean of the Foreign Languages College, the director of the College English Department, and the person in charge of the College English teaching group.

2. Meetings were arranged with the personnel managers of local industries and branches of multi-national firms, with lecturers or professors, and with old and new students from the course.

3. At the end of each semester, students were asked to fill out an anonymous questionnaire containing 20 questions about their reactions to the course.

It was thus possible to obtain statistical data (by analysis of the questionnaire using a computer, and by histograms of the themes arising during meetings and interviews) on which could be based a more comprehensive and quantitative definition of the target group with respect to its real needs, motivations, and inhibitions. On the other hand, it was also possible to take into account the requirements of the University and of future employers. It is perhaps worth emphasizing the advantage of such a system of data collection and analysis, which is flexible, easily modified, and adaptable to different group situations.

An analysis of the data collected showed that a large proportion of students studying College English (88%-96%) had improvement of their oral skills and comprehension as their principal objective. However, a minority (10%-20%) also wanted to maintain the level of written expression and comprehension acquired before starting the course. It was also clear that a large majority of the students (79~86%) preferred to be semi-autonomous in class. The reservations of some students about such an approach disappeared rapidly during the semester, as will be explained further on. In any case, the pedagogical structure proposed was sufficiently flexible to accommodate those students not yet completely liberated from their secondary school attitudes, and who desired (at least for a time) to follow a more traditional learning method.

Finally, the preliminary enquiries showed that the students --- future scientists and engineers --- would, for the most part, stay in China, and would therefore use their foreign language in China and during short periods outside China on trips, conferences, etc. On the other hand, a certain number --- fewer than 10% --- would become
expatriates in an English-speaking country for more than one year. Thus, while the students clearly needed to have a certain competence in the technical English of their special subjects, their major need was related to their problems in oral English expression and communication in non-professional situations.

**Implementation of the programme**

At the beginning of the first year, the 30 students on the course were briefed about the aim of the self-directed learning programme, and told that participation was entirely optional. The work and pedagogical experiments of B. Schwartz have shown that knowledge which does not include any know-how is rarely retained Autonomy (Schwartz, 1964). Our students were in a position to determine the skills that they would like to acquire. Also, they were adult enough to know what skills would be required of them after leaving university (even if these desirable skills were difficult to acquire or of little interest to them in the short term). For these reasons it was decided to base the course on the learner himself, with the introduction of a pedagogy based on specific objectives and a shift away from the traditional dominance of the teacher to a situation in which the teacher acted as the supervisor of self-directed learning.

Such a new system implies profound changes in the attitudes and habits of both teachers and students. The former have to discard their traditional role as ‘the authority from whom all knowledge flows’ and develop instead an aptitude for ‘empathy’, and the ability to act as listeners and ‘catalysts’. The latter must no longer seek refuge in their passive role in the old ‘no-risk’, ‘maternal’ system but, on the contrary, must take charge of their own training’. In other words, they are expected to become capable of defining:

1. their needs in terms of new skills to be acquired and of their short-term and long-term objectives;
2. the conditions, the techniques, and materials to be used during their training;
3. the system of evaluation of their performance during the course.

The success of such a system obviously depends on the readiness of all concerned to ‘play the game’. This implies a tacit contract at the beginning of the course, which may be revised later on. To help students determine their learning objectives and complete the contract, they are asked to complete an awareness-raising self-evaluation task and to share their reflections in small group tutorials. The awareness-raising self-evaluation task asked about students’ perceptions of their strengths as learners of English, their weaknesses as a learner of English, the language skills needed to cope
with the demands of the course, the role of the English teacher, and their own role in improving their English. Students are asked to explain what they had chosen, and why, and how much time they could afford to spend on the programme each week. Several important features of the programme are told:

1. They should keep their own learning record, that is they should monitor their own progress.
2. They could re-negotiate the contract with the teacher at any time. In other words, they would be responsible for reflecting upon and evaluating their own learning, and should take the initiative to make changes when necessary.
3. At the end of the first term, they would evaluate their own progress and re-design the contract for the second term.
4. They could approach the teacher for help or advice at any time. Arrangements were made during the course for the students to meet with the teacher individually, and with their peers, for exchange. The teacher held individual sessions with students at least three times: at first contract signing, second contract signing, and interview at the end of the academic year. The exchange sessions were arranged for students twice during the course. In the first session, students mainly shared information about the progress of their work, and showed each other how they recorded it. In the second session, students formed small groups and shared some of the interesting aspects of their work, e.g. a book they had enjoyed reading, or a good TV programme they had watched.

Since it is necessary to have more than one participant in communication, and also because of the number of students (30), it was decided to take advantage of the ‘group effect’ on the creativity and motivation of group members, and to demand specific tasks and programmes of the groups that were formed in class. Each student was required to join a group of three to five people, freely constituted according to personal affinities and objectives. Each group was required to present a programme which would demonstrate the competence of members of the group in the language skills they had opted to develop at the beginning of the course. The type of activity and details of the programme were left to the groups. These included making short videotapes, producing a sequence of slides with a commentary, holding debates, doing press-reviews (for those who wanted to develop their written skills), presenting dramatic sketches, interviews, ‘TV-games’, etc.

Each student was thus engaged throughout the semester in work directly related to the specific linguistic and communicative objectives chosen.
At the end of the academic year, students were asked to do a self-evaluation task similar to the awareness-raising task they had done at the beginning of the programme. Individual interviews were also conducted with students to seek their views on the programme.

One example of language objectives was:

**Presenting Dramatic Sketches**

This programme was concerned with presenting at least once the English drama in some recreative activities of the University. The dialogue (stage lines) must be mostly rewritten by themselves. The basic frame-work was prepared in advance by the students. The dialogue was improvised ‘on stage’. Recording the sequences on videotape enabled the students to appraise their performance and improve upon it (alone, or sometimes with the help of a native speaker). The five group members come from the College of Movie and Television.

General objectives: to learn more about the famous English drama, to practice their playing skills, and to improve their written skills.

Communicative objectives: a better mastery of interpersonal communication and of interactive discourse, acquisition of a better pronunciation (intonation, rhythm, stress, etc.).

The criteria for evaluating the play were as follows:

a. comprehension and clarity
b. fluency and ease
c. adaptation to unforeseen elements occurring in spontaneous speech
d. relevance of speaker interventions, etc.

In some cases, more specific individual criteria were added.

**Strategy of the programme**

The successful functioning of the system depends on the help of the teacher and on the collaborative learning. At the same time, the students must be able to count on the necessary materials and technical aids.

Promoting learner autonomy does not mean a reduction of teacher intervention or initiative. As far as pedagogical support is concerned, each student has regular individual interviews with the teacher, during which an assessment is made of his or her performance, and the training strategy modified if necessary. We have found that after a preliminary familiarization period of several weeks, the student groups attain an intensive rhythm of work in which the help of the teacher is needed less and less. In fact,
a large measure of diagnosis, evaluation, and self-correction is made possible by the use of video equipment, and the presence of the teacher becomes necessary only at critical points to start off a new activity, to explain certain tricky language points, etc.

Learner autonomy and self-directed learning have increasingly been associated with social and collaborative learning (Benson 1996). In this programme, the total amount of work done by the students is much greater than would be the case in a traditional language course. The stimulating effect of the group on the richness of communication, self-correction, and creativity must also be mentioned as a significant benefit of the new system. A sense of responsibility and solidarity is engendered by having to finish a programme for the end of the semester. Having learners share successful strategies with their peers is an important part of learner training (Tyacke 1991). The assessment of students is made easier, because the teacher does not have to be the sole judge. In fact, the students tend to be more severe in their evaluation of their performance relative to the objectives decided at the beginning of the semester. An examination of the statistics reveals that more than three-quarters of the students obtain a pass in the course at the end of the semester. In general, those who fail are not unhappy about having to repeat certain aspects of their work.

With respect to material support, an expanding audio- and video-tape library and many multimedia classrooms have been built up over the past few years. Students borrow cassettes or video cassettes and utilizing the multimedia classroom, either for creative work, or for information. Written support material is also available and includes magazines of English or American origin, games, grammar and vocabulary cards, and ‘language function cards’ (e.g. ‘refusing an offer’, ‘introducing people’, etc.). In addition, there are four language laboratories, differently equipped, but both available on a self-service basis.

**Conclusion**

Learner autonomy is promoted through the provision of circumstances and contexts for language learners which will make it more likely that they take charge --- at least temporarily --- of the whole or part of their language-learning programme, and which are more likely to help rather than prevent learners from exercising their autonomy. (Esch 1996: 37) The results of the case study support the views of Esch. It has not been our intention to describe in detail everything that is necessary for the success of a semi-autonomous or autonomous teaching system, nor would it be appropriate to imply that this method is completely transferable or exportable. The
success of such a system, which in fact is continually being modified in response to our experiences, depends to a large extent on the readiness or aptitude of both the teachers and the students for change and innovation. The aim of self-directed learning is to promote independence in learners so that they can continue their language development and take increasing responsibility for their learning. Creating a self-directed learning programme, however, does not in itself enable learners to become self-directed. The qualities of ‘empathy’ and ‘realness’ as defined by Rogers are indispensable for the successful running of such a course (Rogers, 1969). The students soon acquire the conviction that they are enriching themselves by being responsible for their own development. Being in groups has a stimulating effect and leads them to exchange their attitude of competition for one of cooperation. It is particularly satisfying to note that since the beginning of the programme, past students learning College English have requested further training in English, and have opted for increased autonomy.

In order to implement self-directed learning more effectively, two areas need to be further addressed.

1. **Learner training**

   Some students are not as ready as others for independent language learning. The self-directed learning programme turned out to be more successful with those learners who were already self-sufficient and demonstrated some degree of autonomy in learning. However, this does not mean that the less ready or less enthusiastic students are not capable of autonomy. Nunan (1996: 13) rightly points out that ‘some degree of autonomy can be fostered in learners regardless of the extent to which they are naturally predisposed to the notion’. The self-directed learning programme reported here was offered as ancillary to the main language course. In order to help students become autonomous, it would be more effective to provide learner training alongside the programme, and make it an integral part of the course. Learner-training activities can be incorporated systematically in the classroom to help students become more aware of the learning process, more ready to take charge of their own learning, and empowered to make their own changes. Through learner training, learners can be helped to ‘come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses, to learn a language efficiently in ways which are compatible with their personalities’ (Gremmo and Riley 1995: 158). Learner training would benefit the ‘lazy’ students, who might feel that they are doomed to failure in language learning due to their own laziness in the programme, by increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem.

2. **Providing genuine**
Providing learners with choice is crucial to the development of learner choice autonomy. Learner choice should mean ‘genuine’ choice, with as many alternatives provided as possible. Unfortunately, students in the programme were not able to exercise genuine choice due to the lack of learning materials. Ideally, a self-directed learning programme should be organized by the classroom teacher, with the support of resources and facilities provided by a self-access centre: ‘A self-access resource centre is a good start to provide choice for learners’ (Esch 1996: 39).

References
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