The Application of Classroom Negotiation

Song Qingwen
Anhui Normal University

Recent innovations in classroom practice in China have emphasized the value of collaborative learning, learner-centeredness, learner autonomy and shared decision-making. In the teaching-learning process, students’ important role is drawing much attention of English teachers. As English teaching is geared towards students’ needs, teachers should listen to students, learn what they expect to learn in the English class, what they think of the present way of teaching, and most important of all, in what way do they want to carry out their study in the classroom. So, negotiation between students and their teacher is essential to a successful English class. That is to say, we need a discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organized. (Breen & Littlejohn, 1998) To the teachers, classroom negotiation should not be an approach, a method or a technique, but a way of making decisions concerning the content and ways of learning, acting in a classroom seen as a dynamic communal resource. It does not mean the abdication of teachers but a shift in self-definition as an English teacher, which, in turn, can trigger students’ motivation and learner autonomy as language learners and bring about new climate to English classrooms in many universities in China.

The concept of negotiation can be dated back as early as the Enlightenment in the 18th century, which is called classical liberalism and from which Bertrand Russell developed his “humanistic conception”. Dewey in the USA also asserted a humanistic conception of education in the context of what he saw as a real struggle for genuine democracy. He believed that the educational process should encourage open-mindedness, wholehearted involvement and significantly, a sense of responsibility of oneself and the wider community (Dewey, 1933; 1938)

Negotiation can be classified into three kinds in terms of the main purposes they serve in particular contexts of communication: personal, interactive and procedural negotiation. Personal negotiation refers to the unobservable and complex mental processing that occurs in our search for understanding and our efforts to be understood. It underlies all the negotiation we do. Interactive negotiation is a social behavior. It occurs when people use language either to indicate their understanding or their failure to understand what another person has said, or in order to modify and restructure their language to make things clearer so that they will be understood. The major function of personal and interactive negotiation is to uncover and share meaning. The negotiation that is conducted in the English class in a procedural negotiation, exemplified by discussions between people who are likely to have different interests or different points of view but who seek to reach agreement on a
matter. Its primary function is managing teaching and learning as a group experience. In other words, the goal of the classroom negotiation is to make decisions concerning the purpose of the learning, its focus or content, and especially the ways in which it will be undertaken in the classroom group. Negotiation is necessary to a successful English class at the tertiary level.

First, the popular student-centered syllabus design requires that both students and their teacher participate in pre-course planning. Such practice may trigger students’ intrinsic motivation that is much more decisive than the extrinsic motivation. Some people say that motivation is the difference between success and failure. If they are motivated, they will learn, and if not, they won’t. Of course, people may argue that motivation is not the only determiner of success for a language learner. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you may not succeed. But, if the students in your class are given an opportunity to “do” language for their own personal reasons, surely they will have a better chance of success. Generally speaking, there are different kinds of motivations and different ways of classifying. H. D. Brown classifies them into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Extrinsic motivations in second language classes are exemplified by school curriculum, parental expectations, society’s expectations, tests, competitions and making money. While intrinsic motivation has nothing to do with any reward. It may be more concerned with peer evaluation or individualization. They are certain innate drives, which are apparently more powerful in guiding people’s activities. Edward Deci (1975:23) defined intrinsic motivation in this way: *Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward.* As a saying goes, “You can drive a horse to the river, but you cannot make it drink”. Intrinsic motivation is the most powerful. The best policy of teachers is to stimulate students into active learners by triggering students’ intrinsic motivation, or in other words, their innate drive in language learning. An intrinsically-motivated education is advocated by many educators like Rudolf Steiner and Carl Rogers. But the present situation in the English classes at tertiary level in China may force students to the opposite direction. In most cases, English learning in the universities is just extrinsically motivated. The fixed curriculum, parental wishes and current society’s values are forced on students. Tests such as CET and TEM are imposed on students without any consultation of students themselves. These external pressures may even make students lose certain innate drive in language learning. They will become passive learners showing no individual interest, and sooner or later lacking in creativity and autonomy in language learning. The language teaching process will then be extremely ineffective.

A negotiation between teachers and students is quite necessary. In negotiation, a teacher will first listen to students so as to get firsthand information about students’ needs and wishes, and about their understanding of language learning and their present conditions in English learning. In negotiation, he may find to what extent students can cooperate with him in teaching so as to avoid any ineffective activity. Besides, the teacher can seize this chance to make the fixed school curriculum understood by students and adjusted to students’ level, sort out a better teaching
method and at the meantime, complete the important task of transforming students from passive learners into active and creative ones, so as to produce a more effective English teaching syllabus. To students, negotiation provides them with an opportunity to take part in making decisions on syllabus and classroom activities. After negotiation, the teaching content and classroom activities may be modified to fit in with a certain class of students better. And since the activities and the content are the joint decision of both students and their teacher, students may accept them more willingly. Moreover, since students can hear their own voices in the process of negotiation, they may feel they have played an important role in classroom decision-making, which may help to build learner autonomy. All these factors are essential to an intrinsically motivated teaching.

Second, as far as the present situation of many universities is concerned, negotiation is also necessary. For one thing, an English teacher may often find himself in such a situation: he has to teach classes at different levels with the same coursework. For example, teachers who teach college English often teach students of different majors. Since different majors may have different admission requirements of English, these students may be at different levels of language faculty. Especially, with the increase of student number and the appearance of the secondary institute, the admission requirements of universities are much lowered, so much so that teachers won’t be able to predict what kind of students they will have to teach. Thus, it is quite urgent that teachers should adjust original syllabus to the new situation. Besides, students of a certain major may have some particular needs or interests in English learning, which is closely related with their major. For example, students majoring in News may find strong urge to learn more knowledge on the genre and features of news reports and styles of writing, while students of Chinese literature major may show particular interest in western literary writers and their works. So, in order to achieve effectiveness in teaching, the teacher has to adjust his teaching strategy to a particular class of students. So, there need to be a negotiation between the two parties of the teaching process. And even in the same major and the same class, there are still individual differences concerning students’ language faculty. It is quite evident that a negotiation is indispensable to a successful syllabus of English teaching. For another, nowadays, there is a new trend of academic study---- most students call for practical knowledge. They are not content with learning just for learning’s own sake. They more care about preparing for their future career after graduation. And there is no exception to English class. So, a most important task for college English teachers is to make sure what their students want.

As for the feasibility of negotiation, the answer is quite affirmative. First of all, tertiary education is adult teaching. Most of university students have formed their own understanding to English learning with the experiences of more than six years of English learning. And most of them can be trusted to have a sound judgment as to what they should do. Although there exist students who will take advantage of the negotiation to lower the academic requirement to them, teachers as experts in English teaching should be able to avoid such matters. A good strategy is never take the opinion of one or two students as that of the whole class. Secondly, the state tests,
such as CET Band 4 and TEM Band 4 set a goal for students. Since such tests are now taken into consideration by the employers before deciding whether to take on a university graduate or not. Students will sincerely wish to improve their English by being more cooperative with their teacher. Thirdly, the classroom negotiation is within a teacher’s power. The syllabus, which is set by authoritative institutions, only gives requirements concerning students’ basic language skills. Teachers still have the power to control part of the teaching content, all the in-class activities and some of the post-class activities. Then under the joint effort of both parties, an optimal teaching plan is probable to be worked out. Moreover, after an English teacher is assigned the teaching task, he or she will probably teach the class of students for one year or two. So, the two parties in the English class have plenty of time to get used to each other and to modify their learning plans.

The following is a brief report of my attempt in applying negotiation to English teaching of two university classes at different levels. One is of English education major (mentioned as EE Class in the rest part of the paper). The other is of business English (BE class). The admission requirements for the two classes are dramatically different. Students of EE Class had to score at least 510 in the national college entrance examination, while that of the other is no more than 490. The lowest score of English in the first class is 100, while that of the other is about 70. So I decided to make respective teaching plans on the basis of negotiation with them.

In the first stage, I intended to achieve mutual understanding between my students and me. On the first day of school, I asked them to make self-introductions in class. In EE Class, I noticed that some of the students showed their unwillingness to be an English major. But for this or that reason they had to make such a choice. One student declared her fondness of Chinese literature. But because her parents hoped she would be an English teacher and as an obedient daughter, she didn’t want to let them disappointed. And another student just told me after class that his interest was in mathematics. He chose English only because it was popular and it would be easy for him to find a job and earn a living. These students seemed to show no intrinsic motivation in learning English. Besides, some of them who scored high in the national entrance examination complained that this school was not their hearts’ choice. They had intended to attend elite universities like Beijing University in China. From an oral survey only about 65% of the students showed their fondness of English. So, first of all, as an English teacher I should make sure that more of them are highly motivated. Only then, can they bear a proper attitude and can be trusted in the negotiation, and can we achieve collaborative learning. Thanks to the academic credit system, which has just started the year before, students are entitled to change their majors and shift to other departments in their first year of study. So, I started the negotiation by asking those who showed unwillingness in being an English major to consider transferring to other desirable majors and take it as a second choice out of their own will. They agreed to reconsider their choice. Meanwhile, I talked with them about our major, showing them the great prospects for English majors. It’s quite
interesting that after a half academic year, no one put forward applications of transferring, instead they now seem to be more determined to be an English major and are very hard working. By contrast, students in my Business English class showed their high motivation in English learning. Since their admission scores were much lower, they regarded themselves as very lucky to be able to study here. No one showed any dissatisfaction with his major. Some girls, even on the first days of the school, consulted me about TEM tests that they will take in the fourth semester, and showed me their determination to overtake students of the EE Class in academic performance. Their strong desire to make achievement in language learning is quite evident. Their enthusiasm in learning and their cooperative attitude could be felt in each class I have taught. To teach such intrinsically motivated students is actually a pleasurable job. So my requirements for them are almost the same as those for students of EE Class.

One thing that needed to be made clear is that negotiation should be a continuous process. Teachers and students cannot reach the agreement once and for all. In fact, they should always be in the process of negotiation with each other. My second task in negotiation is to make students clear about our academic arrangement, the requirement for them and the features of this course and then tell them what can be negotiated, such as part of our teaching content, and some classroom activities. What I teach is integrated language skill training, six periods per week. We have three tests and a final each term, which cannot be negotiated. Students are required to complete their homework, practice the basic language skill of listening, reading, speaking and writing in class and out of class. And then I introduced them the features of the textbook that we are going to use, its advantages and disadvantages. Volume One and Two are good guidebooks for language training which features in the oral training, while those texts are not suitable for intensive reading, frankly speaking, quite easy for university students. But the two classes may have different idea about it. So, we had to find some solutions to this problem. Besides, at the tertiary level, teachers may attach more importance to language skills and lexical power other than grammatical work. But that doesn’t mean students can forget basic grammatical rules, especially those rules that are essential in sentence writing. Students are encouraged to acquire grammar knowledge through reading in the university stage. Then, I asked them to think over and give some suggestion if there is any, before I put forward my suggestions concerning these two problems. My suggestions are as such: Do some reading daily and keep reading notes daily, and hand in the reading notes per week. I presented them with the sample of a reading note and provided them with a book list. Besides, I suggested them doing listening exercises daily. Since they had listening class teacher, I didn’t give them any requirement. I supposed that their listening teacher might have some requirements to them. To these suggestions, they agreed. The following is the result of negotiation:

In-Class Activities:

EE Class: following the procedure in the textbook; an oral report by one student for each time of class (which is a tradition in this course);

BE Class: (the same)
Post-Class Activities:
EE Class: 3 reading notes per week; listening practice daily
BE Class: 2 reading notes per week; listening practice daily

The Second stage of negotiation was actually the first negotiation, for students really had something to say, now after two weeks of personal experiences. At that time, students came to realize what our integrated language skills training course was like. All their previous imagination about college study had been replaced by personal feelings then. I was sure they needed a negotiation. So we had one. We talked about our in-class activities, their own needs in this course and their impressions of study at the tertiary level. This time both classes had something to say. Students of EE Class showed their apparent disappointment in finding that the texts in our textbooks are so short and not so challenging, although I told them before that this coursework is for the integrated skill training. They also expressed their uncertainty concerning ways of improving their language abilities (especially pronunciation) and their worries about the future tests. They felt they couldn’t learn much (more exactly, vocabulary and grammar) from the course as they once expected. So I suggested doing some grammar exercises. They totally agreed. As for the classroom activities they were quite satisfied with them, especially the oral report and the oral part of each unit (which is composed of two dialogue making, retelling of the text and the role play). After the negotiation we reached to an agreement:

In-Class Activities:
EE Class: following the procedure in the textbook; an oral report by a student each time; some competitive activities in class, such as prose recitation;
BE Class: (the same)

Post-Class Activities
EE Class: three reading notes per week; three units of the Longman exercises per week; listening practice;
BE Class: two reading notes per week; three units of the Longman exercises per week; listening practice;

The Third Stage of Negotiation
Because of the school authorities’ special arrangement of this academic year, the first semester was only two months long. Before we realized, the first semester closed. When the second term began, I opened another negotiation. After two months’ study, students had much to say about their studies. So we talked about their feelings of the academic arrangement, our in-class and post-class activities and their own problems concerning basic language skills, and what they wanted to learn in this course. The majority of the students are content with the academic arrangement as it is reasonable. But, both classes complained that the in-class activities are boring, always following the same procedures designed in the textbooks so that they can always tell what they will do in the next class, and that the teacher talked too much so that they hadn’t had enough participation in the in-class activities. They were eager to have a change. Besides, many suggested activities, such as classroom debating, free talk, poem competition, and more video shows, even listening to music or singing English
songs in class. Some students complained that because of their personality and their poor oral ability, they didn’t have courage to make oral presentation in class, and that only some students’ voices could be heard. However, others are quite happy with the present oral practice. Some needed more text explanation, while others complained that I had spent too much time on it and the exercises after it. So, I could see that students’ needs vary from individual to individual in some respects. As a teacher, it’s hard to satisfy each of them. But still, I should do my best to adjust the teaching strategy to the needs of most of the students, or more exactly, bring diversity to in-class activities.

As for the post-class work, they worried about the quality of their own writing in the reading notes, and complained that the vocabulary in Longman passages was too out-dated. When asked about their own needs in language learning, their answers revolved around “knowledge of the usage of words”, “more oral English training including pronunciation”, cultural information, writing ability and more “practical knowledge”. One student even hoped to have a class in the open air, saying it’s her dream from the primary school. Quite a number of the students mentioned their interest, hoping their teacher could organize in-class activities and post-class assignments in a way that their interest in learning can be fostered. I could see students also realized the importance of intrinsic motivation in the learning process.

After the negotiation, we reached certain agreement on the following aspects:

In-Class activities:

EE Class:

1. Changing the procedure in the textbook; more time on oral practice, including spontaneous dialogue, the role play and retelling; less time on explaining the dialogue and the text, only mentioning the key points and the usage of some new words;
2. One 10-15 minutes lecture on western culture or background knowledge for each unit;
3. 5 minutes each class for students’ questions
4. One classroom debate each month;
5. A contest each term (a word contest this term)
6. At least one video show each term
7. One oral report by a student each time of class

BE Class:

1. Changing the procedure in the textbook; more time on oral practice, including the role-play and retelling; brief explanation of some grammatical points and of the text.
2. One 10-15 minutes lecture on western culture or background knowledge each unit
3. 5 minutes each class for students’ questions
4. One classroom debate each month;
5. A contest each term (a word contest this term)
6. One video show each term
7. One oral report by a student each time of class
8. More classes in the multi-media classroom, which will increase students’ interest in learning

Post-Class Activities:

EE Class:
1. One reading notes per week (They suggested reducing the quantity so as to improve the quality);
2. Three units of Longman grammar exercise per week, including new words which are not out-dated there;
3. A topic writing practice each week (requested by students themselves)

BE Class:
1. One reading notes per week
2. Three units of Longman grammar exercise per week, including new words which are not out-dated there;
3. Some extra chances of watching videos as a reward if they have done better in practices like dictation or spelling

The negotiations between my students and me were made in both oral and written forms, for some students might find it hard to evaluate their teacher’s teaching in her presence, so I also asked them to write down their ideas without signing their names. In this way, we have managed to open several negotiations between us. By negotiation, I hope I can always stand at my students’ side, making them feel the master of the English class, so as to develop their learner autonomy and at the same time foster their interest in English learning. Such a shift of position in the teaching process has brought me much extra work, even troubles. But I will not change my mind, because I have felt students’ trust and their acknowledgement to my work. In a recent poll about teachers’ teaching quality conducted by the school authority, my students’ average degree of satisfaction with my teaching was 92.7%, which was very high. But in my previous records, the highest degree I ever got was 84.9, although I was always proud of myself as a good teacher with high sense of responsibility and devotion to my work. Furthermore, students have become more active and cooperative in class. So, I am sure that only when we save our students from passively accepting orders, from blindly wasting their time on unnecessary homework can we actually free their creativity and sense of responsibility, can we have the first-class students in the English classes in Chinese universities.

References:
3. Nunan, D.2001 The Learner-Centred Curriculum ---- A study in second language teaching 上海外语教育出版社