On the Prospect of
Learner-Centred Teaching of English in China

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Abstract

In this paper, the current situation of learner-centred pedagogy in China’s tertiary institutes of higher education is reviewed, together with the author’s informed comments on it (Wu, 2003). What’s more, the good experience of colleagues in Hong Kong (Ho and Crookall, 1995; Scollon and Scollon, 1994) in this area of applied linguistics is scrutinized by the current author as the sociolinguistic condition in Hong Kong is similar but not entirely homogeneous to that in mainland China. In the end, it is concluded that official large-scale empirical research projects sponsored by the Ministry of Education are urgently needed if the authorities wish to improve the quality of English teaching in the expanding universities and colleges all over China.

Key words: learner-centred teaching, China’s ELT at the tertiary level

1. Introduction

With the current liberal policy of opening to the outside world, English Language Teaching (ELT) is increasingly popular in China. Furthermore, with the recent success of China’s accession to the World Trade Organization and winning for hosting the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, there is an obvious consensus among the nation that English is a necessity for almost any modern Chinese. Despite the apparent achievements of China’s ELT profession for the last couple of decades, there are still unsatisfactory aspects in teaching the English language at the tertiary level, especially when oral skills are concerned. Some government officials have made their complaints about that in public. This makes it more urgent that current teaching methodology should be changed or at least modified with respect to the necessary ‘reform’ in the teaching of English in China, particularly at the tertiary level.

If we need something new and better to replace the old way of teaching English, there seems to be one promising candidate for teachers to select, i.e. the learner-centred approach in foreign language instruction. With the introduction of relevant theory and related rationale in China’s applied linguistics community, some teachers have showed considerable interest in this new teaching method. There are some who have gone even so far as regarding the approach as a magic
panacea.

However, considering the fact that China has a very different cultural and philosophical history and milieu from that in the west, what is applicable in the European context may probably not work in this country. Although there are some small-scale experiments on this teaching method in China which have produced positive and encouraging results, mainly by Ying Huilan and her associates (Ying et al., 1998, 2001) in Zhejiang University, it can not be concluded yet that this imported teaching method is of the greatest promise in solving the many difficulties widespread in China’s universities and colleges, e.g. incoherent syllabus design with the secondary educational system, misguided pseudo-‘needs analysis’, difficult situation for teacher autonomy and its relationship with learner autonomy, poor and limited facilities for learners’ self-access on campus, and students’ reluctance and impotence in self-direction. All in all, there is a fundamental problem for implementing learner-centred teaching in China. That is, a deep-rooted belief in teacher’s role model for cultivating students, which is inherited from thousands of years ago, makes learners uncomfortable when they are told that they enjoy an equal right with the teacher in the classroom. Besides, teachers also feel awkward, not only psychologically but also professionally. That is to say, many teachers are not ready in their professional training and preparation. Their needs include receiving target-oriented help in terms of modern educational technology and modern psychological theory and practice.

2. Why Learner-Centred?

The fact that the learner-centred approach of foreign language teaching has received favourable recognition in China is supported by the apparent publicity of the issue in foreign academic journals, particularly in the prestigious Language Teaching and the technology-oriented System. The historical context and development of this applied linguistics issue is best summarized in Gremmo and Riley (1995). Whether teachers in China know the general tendency of this ‘liberal way of teaching English’ or not, there seem to be well-founded reasons for foreign language practitioners to accept this new idea and practice. According to Gremmo and Riley, the justifiable ideas and historical contingencies of this strong movement include:

- minority rights movements, shifts in educational philosophy, reactions against behaviorism, linguistic pragmatism, wider access to education, increased internationalism, the commercialization of language provision and easier availability of educational technology.

(Gremmo and Riley, 1995: 151)

Although there is a definite justification for adopting this learner-centred teaching method in China, there is little discussion of the theoretical validity of the issue among Chinese teachers of English. This fact makes it hard for the teachers to get a full understanding of the deeper rationale behind this teaching theory (or hypothesis). As a result, the prospect of applying this approach is considerably impeded, or even doomed to suffer from a complete failure in China. This makes the feasibility of applying this method significantly low, particularly when one considers the current popularization of the new method all over China.

It is believed, therefore, that the future of China’s reform of college English teaching CANNOT depend on this untested single teaching method. Its effectiveness in actual teaching circumstances
has received little support and evaluation. So far, nobody can be absolutely optimistic in suggesting to put the method into large-scale application in China, because the factors which determine the success of this method are too many. There are problems concerning the software, i.e. the training of teachers, and the hardware, i.e. the establishment of sufficient self-access learning centres which cost a lot of money.

3. **Learner Autonomy vs. Teacher Autonomy: Which is the Current Priority?**

   If one claims that the future of China’s English teaching at the tertiary level lies in the application of the learner-centred approach, he faces the danger of jumping on the band wagon without noticing the other side of the same coin. That is to say, how do we evaluate the role of the teacher in a new situation? Little points out, with good observation, that learning is a process of dialogue. It is not enough to emphasize the positive role of the learner only in the creative process of learning a foreign language. As he argues:

   while learning strategies and learner training can play an important supporting role in the development of learner autonomy, the decisive factor will always be the nature of the pedagogical dialogue; and that since learning arises from interaction and interaction is characterized by interdependence, the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers.

   (Little, 1995: 175)

   What Little sees more important in the process of teaching, i.e. the dialogue, is the education of teachers. With respect to this issue, the Chinese sector of higher education is in a very awkward position because many teachers of English in China are not professionally qualified, particularly when there is even an obvious shortage of teachers of English after the authorities started the policy of expanding the enrollment of university students. In short, Little’s argument is that, if learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, then the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy (Little, 1995: 179). With respect to teacher education, the Chinese teachers have a lot to be sorry for. Therefore, it is time we started to think about the teachers, not the learners now.

4. **From Europe to China: Who Cares about the Cultural Differences?**

   The notion of learner-centred teaching is introduced to China from Europe. There is an important element which is much neglected by the Chinese teachers, viz. the values and social psychology (propensity) between the two geographical locations are markedly different. The heterogeneity of culture in Europe and that in China can be a very serious obstacle to the Chinese teachers. For example, a very well-known empirical research in Hong Kong produces the following conclusion:

   While personal autonomy appears to be a universally desirable and beneficial objective, it is important to remember that learner autonomy is exercised within the context of specific cultures. Therefore, in choosing the skills and kinds of knowledge to develop and in selecting
the procedures or methods that are to be used to help learners develop skills for autonomy, the culturally-constructed nature of the classroom setting needs to be taken into account. We must also consider how certain cultural traits might either facilitate or inhibit the acquisition of these skills and knowledge and, thus, restrain or assist the development of autonomy.
(Ho and Crookall, 1995: 236-237)

In applying the learner-centred teaching method in China, there are at least two cultural barriers for us to overcome, viz. the notion of authority and the notorious concept of *mien-tzu* (face) on the part of the Chinese learners. In China, both teachers’ and learners’ views of classroom roles are deeply rooted in the Chinese tradition of seeing oneself as a part of a ‘relational hierarchy’ (Chang and Holt, 1994: 105). This hierarchy of human relations sets the general context within which we must understand Chinese students’ respect for authority and their view of the teacher as the authority figure. Some scholars have made the following comment regarding the contrast between the ways that Asians and Westerners regard authority:

The Asian focuses on the care, nurture and benevolence (or their absence) of the person in authority while the westerner tends to focus on the restriction, limitation and dependence of the person over which the authority is exercised.
(Scollon and Scollon, 1994: 21)

That is to say, according to the Asian criterion of authority, the teacher is expected to exercise authority, that is, to look after or nurture his students and take charge. Moreover, closely related to Chinese respect for authority is the Chinese pre-occupation with *face*. Chang and Holt (1994: 115) have made the point that in communicating with another person, one Chinese must “protect the other’s self-image and feelings, he or she is not confronted directly.” This explains why many Chinese students will not challenge their teacher’s position on a given point (or indeed authority in general). Chinese students have a great respect for and wish to maintain their teacher’s *mien-tzu* (face). With similar concern for *mien-tzu*, the teacher is also reluctant to admit any inadequacies on his part. It is very difficult for a Chinese teacher to say “I am sorry. I don’t know. Let’s work out a solution together.”

Furthermore, being autonomous often requires that students work independently of the teacher and this may entail shared decision making, as well as presenting opinions that differ from those of the teacher. It is, therefore, easy to see why Chinese students would not find autonomy very comfortable, emotionally or indeed intellectually. Consequently, changing the teaching method is one thing, but changing many Chinese students’ way of life is another. The teacher is, anyway, a powerless individual figure compared with the large number of students in the classroom, which can be as many as eighty in some universities.

5. *A Dubious Reality May Lead to a Disappointing Vista*

In addition to the difficulties mentioned above, Cai (2002) summarizes six kinds of pressures faced by current college English teaching in China. That is, in the current author’s view, very fundamental in our discussion and prediction about the future of using the learner-centred approach in Chinese universities and colleges. Among the six kinds of pressures, there is the one
which the current author believes many people have so far overlooked to a large extent. As Cai points out:

After three years’ expansion, the population of students in three grades has increased by 80%. The shortage of university teachers of English is increasingly serious. In Sun Yat-sen University, 45 teachers teach 10,000 students. The pressure brought about by the expansion of enrollment is not limited to the shortage of teachers only, it also includes the use of classrooms and computers. For instance, because there are not enough classrooms available, Fudan University combined three classes into two. Some universities try to find solutions by reducing four terms of basic English teaching to only one term. Students are asked to take the CET Band 4 test. If they pass, they will not be taught in the subject of English any more. In some universities, half or even all English lessons are conducted by students’ teaching themselves with CD-ROMs only, with the teacher as a question-answerer only. The Ministry of Education proposed to increase the population of university students from 11 million in 2001 to 16 million in 2005, ranking top one all over the world.

(Cai, 2002: 230)

6. Conclusion: Complicated Matters Need Packaged Solutions

From what is said above, it is clear that the author is in favour of treating the learner-centred approach in foreign language instruction as an overall comprehensive project. Some people call this a project of system in applied linguistics, notably Gui Shichun. Consequently, we need to realize that both students and teachers are responsible for introducing and applying this imported teaching method in China.

In short, we are currently badly in need of an official feasibility study. The purpose of the study is to find out a workable solution to this educational conundrum, particularly in China, where there is a unique sociolinguistic situation. Before we receive official and scientifically tested conclusion about the practicality of the learner-centred approach, i.e. learner autonomy in China, any small-scale empirical study is limited in its credibility and significance.

Nevertheless, there are still a certain possible directions for our consideration at the moment. That is to say, a very good starting point for initiating a learner-centred teaching practice is to pay more attention to the classroom teacher. We need to make sure if the teacher is already prepared to put the learner in the ‘centre’. In other words, our priority at the moment is to start the development of teachers as a prerequisite for learner-centred teaching. Little is certainly justified in saying that:

In formal educational contexts learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning – teachers must help them to do so; and they will not necessarily find it easy to reflect critically on the learning process – teachers must first provide them with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practise using them.

(Little, 1995: 176-177)

In a similar vein, Huang and Gu admit, after their empirical research in the Baptist University of Hong Kong, that students are used to the traditional model of passive learning and they are very
uneasy with the new teaching method. The students enjoy being fed by others. With respect to this, the researchers have not found an effective way of dealing with it (Huang and Gu, 1996: 12-13).

In a word, the most important thing for us to think about now is to put the teacher in the centre, or as experts in applied linguistics prefer to say, teacher autonomy first, learner autonomy second.

References:


